

All Roads
Lead To Us

Jiya Vyas



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To my Fateh, you're my best friend, forever.

I'm never letting go of you. Pinky promise.

I miss you.

Jagpreet, my constant in a world that never stops spinning.

You are what true friendship looks like.

Pratyush, you're with me, always.

I hope you see yourself in these pages.

To your Nikhat or Fateh,

I'll hold on to you, for an eternity & after.

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Chapter 1: Nikhat

The first time I walked onto that sprawling campus, I didn't feel like a freshman at all. I was not trembling with nerves or lost in uncertainty; I was alive with eagerness. I had pictured that moment a thousand times over, my mind saturating every detail with vivid, hopeful brush strokes. New beginnings, endless possibilities, and a fresh chapter—those cliché things you read about in a book. The kind they sweep under the rug in those fancy brochures when handing to the prospective students, but which everyone somehow just knows.

Being brought up in a small town, so claustrophobic that gossip traveled faster than news, and where my parents knew I'd been up to something even before I did it. College was my escape, my chance to finally breathe, to be someone other than the girl who lived by her parents' rules. I wasn't just here to earn a degree—I was here to find myself.

Where gossip traveled faster than news, and where my parents knew I'd been up to something even before I did it. College was, at this point, a real escape for me. My chance to finally breathe without the pressure and become someone other than "the good girl who lives by her parents' rulebook." Trust me; this was not just about an academic degree; it was about finding the real me hiding underneath eighteen years of other people's expectations.

For as long as I could remember, I'd romanticized the idea of college. The ride-or-die friendships; the 3 A.M. escapades, turning into legendary stories; the drama; and most of all, the love stories. How can I not have dreamed about "the one", my soulmate. Having been fed a steady diet of dog-eared romance novels and melodramatic Bollywood

movies where rain always falls at the perfect moment. The person who'd make me feel like all the chaos in the world was worth it. Someone I could ramble to like an endless monologue, who'd hang on every last word. I spent actual years imagining meeting him—maybe reaching for the same obscure book in a quiet library corner, our fingers brushing in that perfect movie-moment way.

But here's the thing about being a lover-girl in the real world- not everyone else in the world got the romance script you have been rehearsing. Then reality intervenes, crashing and ruining those fantasies I had spent my teenage years conjuring; from pages in romantic books to the most cheesy dialogues in films, I came with a very vivid imagination.

That day was bright and sunny in fall, the morning I arrived at university. The whole ride to campus was a medley of pride and restrained worry on my parents' faces. They were obviously proud—they'd better be after all those nights I had put into studying—but that unmistakable gaze of parental concerns hid an ocean of undetermined fears as they handed over their daughter into a realm far too unknown to them. I can still feel myself clenching them tight, saying in bursts that everything was going to be okay, while the faint whisper of a voice nagged me from inside, "Will I, though?"

To me, my first impression of campus was nothing like what I had imagined. Sure there were grand buildings draped with ivy as the decorated brochures promised, but it was the hustle and bustle that shocked me. Groups of students were everywhere, laughing, talking, and waving their hands as they hurried from class to class. The noise, the movement—pure magic!

For almost two years in high school, I'd been imagining this very college in my mind, but the reality was that there were so many people, so many strange faces, so many opportunities, and endless paths to get lost. There was something both liberating and intimidating about it all.

With my whole life being dragged behind me, shoved into suitcases, I felt this moment was the beginning of something great. A fresh journey. A journey toward becoming who I was meant to become.

Day One tumbled through various introductions, orientations, and forming the first tentative friendships that might blossom into my college tribe - as my dearest seniors call it. I could feel an almost electrifying feeling in the air, where everyone was eager to find their people, and there was endless wide-eyed hope streaming all around. But for me, day one was also about one thing- "him."

Deep down, I just knew this college was the place it would happen. The one I had always dreamed of. My soulmate. The one who would get me, who would understand me, the one I could laugh with, cry with, and most importantly, fall for- hopelessly, mindlessly, and endlessly.

Growing up, I would sit in front of the TV and watch the love stories unfold on screen, believing every line of the dialogue and every swell of the background music. In contrast, love in real life was a quieter affair. Love didn't care for poetic declarations. It didn't come wrapped in grand gestures or with flowery proclamations. Or so I told myself, even as I watched couples stroll hand-in-hand across campus, sharing little laughter against a backdrop of memories I'd never know. I imagined what it would feel like to have that effortless kind of belonging with someone, to look across a room, a field, a crowd, and think, *there you are, my person.*

As I passed each guy, my mind searched for hints of him. It could be him, the guy ordering coffee right ahead of me? What about that guy under the tree on the bench reading? What about that guy in my class, looking my way whenever he thought the professor wasn't? The possibilities were endless. Every day, I prayed that somehow, the universe would lead me to him.

Settling into life on campus was my top priority in the first few weeks. There were classes to attend, assignments to complete, and new friendships to nurture. I was getting to know my professors, my peers, and the rhythm of the campus. Somewhere at the back of my mind, I kept imagining what he would be like, what he would look like, and how we would meet. Probably in an unexpected way, like both being at the coffee corner at the same time, reaching for the same last chai. Or perhaps we would sit next to each other in a class and just end up talking about something that shared our interest.

But nothing happened.

Time went by, and the more I waited for something to happen, the less it seemed that my expectations were about to take flight. I have started believing that everyone is finding someone while I'm the only one without one. I kept seeing couples walking on campus, fingers intertwined and laughing in the quad, and realized that I was probably the last one still holding out hope.

In spite of that, I still refused to believe that it's impossible. I refuse to think that what I dreamt, my romantic ideal, is too unrealistic. It was meant to be a time she's supposed to discover, and I'm so very sure that my discovery, my "the one," is literally just around the corner.

The campus was alive in a way I wasn't used to. Back home, the most exciting thing about mornings was the sound of

my dad's radio crackling in the kitchen. Here, mornings were chaotic. Coffee cups in hand, students streamed past each other, some laughing, some shouting, all of them heading somewhere with a purpose I wasn't sure I had yet. The quad was dotted with students lounging on the grass, laptops open, their voices blending into the steady hum of campus life. My dorm room, by contrast, was small and quiet, but it felt like mine. The walls were bare except for the fairy lights I'd hung up on my first day, but even in their simplicity, they gave me a sense of comfort I hadn't expected.

In the rush of several new sensations, I clung to small things familiar to me. Morning chai, the way I liked it, with a little too much ginger. A beloved old novel, the pages dog-eared from a lifetime of rereads, kept at my bedside. The fairy lights strung across my room in a warm glow reminiscent of home.

Even that wasn't quite enough to stop the lonely days from creeping in, though. This loneliness was not quite the kind you should expect during physical solitude-it ran far deeper than that, one so tough that it often made one cry. It was the type that came from being unknown, really. Not quite anyway. They knew back home who the heck I was. They knew me, my habits, the way I like my tea. Here, I don't even exist-a mere countenance in a sea of many.

Reality crashed into me after the first month without a small lingering adrenaline rush. Classes were far harder than I thought, and making friends definitely had no '*Netflix*' factor. On most occasions, I felt like just acting without a character, playing all the parts needed to figure out who I am meant to be while catching up with everything else.

But there were moments- magical moments. I remember sitting one evening atop my dorm building, watching the

sun settle down, with a group of people I had only just met. We shared our dreams and fears and everything in between. For a moment there, I felt like I belonged.

By the time the semester settled into a routine, I had started to figure out the “rules” of college life.

Rule one: everyone is figuring it out, even the people who look like they have it all together.

Rule two: you’re going to make mistakes, and that’s okay.

Rule three: don’t fall for the first person who gives you attention.

When the outside world was quieted down by a chorus hooting, I was still lying under my bed in contemplation. My future would now be lost in thought for whether or not I was taking advantage of this experience. Doing things right, is this where I belong?

It was during one of these serene nights, sitting by the window with my novel in hand, that it used to hit me: here it was. The opportunity to build my very own story, to build the life I have always dreamed of. And maybe that’s why I was so fixated on the idea of love—not the kind that lasts for a while and falls apart under pressure, but the kind that brings meaning to your story. The kind of love that wraps you around this whole coming home feeling.

I closed my book and stared out at the campus, at the dimly lit paths where students walked in pairs, their laughter echoing through the night. Somewhere out there, I thought, was the next chapter of my life waiting to unfold. Somewhere out there was someone who might understand the person I was trying to be, someone who might make me feel less alone in the chaos of it all.

But the truth was, I wasn't sure if I even fully understood the person I was trying to be. My days felt like an endless tug-of-war between who I was and who I wanted to become. On some days, I was the bright, optimistic girl with big dreams and even bigger ambitions. On others, I was just a quiet, uncertain version of myself, hiding behind books and pretending to have it all figured out.

I found myself observing people from a distance—their laughter, their confidence, the way it seemed so easy for them to navigate life. I wondered if they ever felt as lost as I did or if I was just missing some unwritten rule book everyone else had received. It was exhausting, feeling like some sort of puzzle missing pieces.

Freedom felt like a double-edged sword. On one hand, I reveled in the ability to do what I wanted without someone hovering over my shoulder. On the other hand, the weight of every decision fell squarely on me. There was no one to blame if I messed up, no one to guide me through the maze of what came next. It was liberating and terrifying all at once.

As much as I wanted to blend in, I couldn't shake the feeling that everyone had already found their place. In the dining hall, groups of friends huddled around tables, laughing and sharing inside jokes. I sat alone with my tray, pretending to scroll through my phone, my heart sinking a little every time someone walked past without a second glance. It wasn't that people weren't kind—they were. But kindness wasn't the same as belonging.

But mostly, I'd think about love.

I could still hear my mother's voice from years ago, telling me I needed to focus on my studies, not boys. 'Love doesn't put food on the table,' she'd say, frowning at the romance novel hidden under my textbook. I was fifteen, and I'd just

finished reading a story about soulmates who found each other despite impossible odds. The kind of love that defied logic, time, and even common sense. I'd looked at her then, a little defiantly, and said, 'But isn't that what makes life beautiful?' She hadn't answered. She'd just shaken her head and walked away, leaving me wondering if I was foolish for wanting something more.

I'd grown up dreaming of a love that felt like the stories I adored. The epic kind of love that filled pages, kept readers up all night, and made them smile with teary eyes at the last sentence. I didn't want something halfway, something fleeting or shallow. I wanted someone who would see all of me—the quirks, the flaws, the messy parts—and not just stay, but embrace them. Someone who would adore and acknowledge these quirks as embellishments, the little details that didn't just decorate who I was, but defined me.

I'd think about whether my soulmate might be in this very campus or anywhere that's near. I'd sit and wonder about what it'd feel like to meet someone who would understand me fully. With him, all the struggles and uncertainties of this new life would become okay. I didn't know who he was, nor did I know when I would meet him. But I truly believed he was out there.

And then I realized I was not just looking for love but looking for myself. College felt like this blank slate, a chance at a new start. I didn't have to be the obedient daughter or the shy girl who stayed out of trouble. I'd tell myself that I'll be the independent, fearless, and bold girl that I had longed to be until I was finally rid of every atom of self-doubt. Days turned to weeks and weeks into months. I began to see the campus not just as a place of learning but as a canvas for my dreams and desires. I joined clubs, participated in events, and started to build memories worth

a lifetime. The campus, which once felt enormous and intimidating, now began to feel like home.

And still, amidst the noise and uncertainty, arose this strangely familiar feeling—like the sensation of something changing. Or someone. I hadn't known yet, but under my feet, the earth had started moving. At first, it felt distant, barely a sensation of even a quiver. I'd be feeling it soon enough. And when I do, it would rattle me beyond my wildest imagination.

Chapter 2: Nikhat

I had spent so much time dreaming about the perfect love story, about finding someone who would sweep me off my feet, someone who would fit perfectly into my idea of what a relationship should be. I imagined every single bit of it and was eager to discover an individual who would fit right in with me. Still, I wasn't entirely certain about its appearance at that moment. All of my desires were unfulfilled, the things that had not been utilized in the past, and the ones I hoped to discover someday.' Perhaps I wasn't prepared, or perhaps I had been searching extensively. When things don't seem like they should, fate has a funny way of making them happen.

That's when I met him....

His name was xxx. My expectations were unrealistic for him. The man I thought would be attractive for me was not his tall, chubby image. He had messy hair that constantly crossed his eyes and was a little taller than me, he always smiled with gleeful cheeks, and despite being nervous looked for more than just humor.

At the age of 18, I wasn't as instantly drawn to him. He wasn't the love of my life I thought he was, at least not initially. Despite being funny and making college-related meals more enjoyable than I expected, it was not like the lightbulb went off in my mind. It's true.

In a short span of time, I began to anticipate our discussions on 'rant-meetings'. We'd chuckle about the most random things, argue over the slightest jokes, and talk about everything in between. His conversation about his family,

aspirations, and desired destinations left me feeling a strong sense of connection. I didn't think he was, but it wasn'.

It wasn't until recently that I was able to witness his arrival, but it was such a moment. I noticed small things like him always sitting close to me and texting me to ask about my day. I was slowly developing feelings for him."

Yet I still felt some hesitation.

After spending a significant amount of time developing my idea of "the one," I found myself struggling to accept the possibility that the man I had been waiting for might not be present in the package I anticipated. I was questioning everything. Was he the one? Or was I just settling? Did I experience love in its current state, or was it a false idea that came to mind?

I soon discovered that true love, in fact, was not about finding someone who fits a particular mold. It was not about the perfect meeting or what I wished to embody. These were the parts where I felt like someone was looking at me and hearing it. The main thing was xxx's laughter on my face, his encouragement and warmth towards me.

However, the reality hit hard as our relationship deepened. This would have been a tough journey. My ideal relationship was not as straightforward as it might appear in movies or books. Why? Our learning journey required mastering our shared rhythms, eccentricities and fears as well as past experiences. We had to compromise, improve our communication, and face the challenges that come with being with someone. It was a tough situation for us.

Everything became complicated at that point.

I was coming to the realization that love wasn't just about finding someone who fulfilled all of my desires. Learning to

love someone despite their imperfections and deciding if they are worthy of your affection was the only way to do it.

The first few weeks of my college life were marked by the realization that love was more than just a passing fancy. The situation was disorganized, intricate, and occasionally uncomfortable. But it was also real. For me, that was the reason I believed in immortality.

It began as an unexpected yet straightforward event.' Although we didn't meet up in a particularly extravagant way, the smile he gave me that day made everything seem much more ordinary.

I was sitting in the library with my laptop open, preparing for an exam that I knew I wasn't capable of, when he came up to me. His effortless confidence left a lasting impression on my face, even though I tried to maintain my normal behavior.

"Good morning," he said with a casual smile. "I warned you, otherwise, to start early." He continued speaking.

You should be attentive to your older ones from time To moment.

I gazed at him, blinking occasionally, trying to comprehend the words. It was obvious that I had seen him in the vicinity. He was omnipresent, appearing on posters for events, conducting student workshops, and spending time with the popular crowd. People were always around him. The idea of him coming over and talking to me never crossed my mind.

I stooped, my cheeks warming up. "It's just too much to ask." Care to help me. What did that mean?

With a shrug on his face, the man's expression spread to include he had just finished writing.

Even though we were good friends, his favourite task was to keep saying he's a senior.' His habit of irritating me was to stare at me all the time, then laugh and look at his child in her cuteness.

"I nodded my head in acknowledgement of his efforts to assist me. "As much as I would like to," I felt the urge to sound more professional, replied with a grumble. Not really my favorite paper."

The sound of his laughter was so effortless and natural that it made me feel like I could relate to all my problems. "I sympathize with this.". Sometimes, the papers we overlook can offer us the most valuable lessons.'

Moreover, your intelligence level is too high for it to be challenging. ".

Even after he left, I was haunted by his uncomplicated and straightforward words. His effect on people was a way of feeling seen and appreciated, even in casual conversation. The fact that he had won the hearts of everyone in his life with ease left me questioning whether it was possible.

It was a few days before we crossed paths once more at symposia on campus. I had a gut feeling that I would see him, which could be why I subconsciously gave more thought to my perfume selection. He was standing across the room and smiling at me. This time, he didn't wave from a distance. He approached me with authority, his warmth enticing me.

I was happy to see you there," he said.

I nodded and a nervous smile spread across my face. "It was fun." What happened?

"I suggest you come join me for the DJ later," he suggested, his voice was cold but genuine. "After that, we can have dinner and maybe talk about your college life."

My heart fluttered. Was this really happening?

Despite my efforts to remain composed, I felt like running out of mental energy. The feeling was too good to be authentic, but it also reminded me of something I'd been longing for. A connection, a spark. Something real.

Throughout the remainder of our evening, we conversed about everything from classes to music and online jokes. He found it effortless. The warmth of every laugh and touch was so genuine and accurate. Soon enough, we were texting each other late at night and sharing songs... and memes.... about our day. Every time I inquired about something important, he made me feel like I was significant and appreciated it.

During those quiet moments and late-night chats, I began to believe that I had found my perfect match.

His presence in my life was remarkable. He possessed an effortless charm and made everything seem like it was supposed to be. We had uncomplicated dates that involved extended walks, ice cream parlors at the corner shop, and lounging in the library. Every single moment, I felt as though this was the answer to my longings for something.

The world seemed to reorganize itself when we were together.' The feeling of having his arms around me was akin to home. All else vanished as he whispered in my ear softly.

I came to the realization that I was falling for him in a way that made me feel so passionate and intense. The girl in the corner was no longer just a shadow of me, trapped in her

thoughts and fears. With him, I was seen. I was wanted. It was as if I had finally found my place.

At one point, everything felt effortless.' After school, we would assemble and converse for several hours in the same dorm room. We had a great time. I had a feeling that maybe this is it, because he never seemed to get tired of me.' The beginning of something real.

I initiated introducing him to my friends, and they were also fond of him. His amusing, charming nature, and genial nature made him a favorite among all. I didn't only have to be friends; he was my lifemate.

In no time, I found myself retorting with him.' He had a way with humor that made me feel good, understood the little things in my life, and was always there for me when I needed him. It was my belief that I had met a perfect match, and I felt blessed to have encountered someone of his kind.

A surprise, enveloped in the enigma of what might be.'...

But as the days progressed, I began to realize that I was no longer just living for myself. The center of his thoughts, actions, and decisions was centered on him. I realized that being better was not just for me, but also for our group.... There was an element of maturity in this relationship that made me want to be more than just girlfriend, but also his equal partner. In the moments where he appeared like the only one in the room, I felt like I had it in me. My goal wasn't just love, but to become the best version of myself as a person.

I fully believed it for a period of time. It was a seamless and effortless connection, and I couldn't be happier. My presence was solely because of me.' I was completely consumed by the notion of us and all the emotions he conveyed to me. I never knew he could make me smile with

just a few words. Each time I heard my phone buzz, a slight sensation of excitement followed me. There was no doubt about our relationship.' But was it enough? Would it last?

I had not yet answered those questions.' Whenever I thought about them, something important occurred: I was willing to uncover the truth. ". The first step towards something new could be a turning point in history. Although it was a terrifying experience, I still found it to be the most thrilling feeling.

The wait became too much for me. That was the only thing I was doing, waiting for the day when he would ask me out. It had been mere weeks since we began hanging out, and, since then, our conversations had passed from the casual to more personal ones. The chemistry was undeniable. He sometimes looked at me, his eyes lingering on my skin for a second longer than necessary, and my heart would race. But something always held me back. I had learned not to make haste in anything I felt was really so precious to me. I therefore waited.

The moments we shared had almost always been so easy. We said little and understood even less, but somehow there was this bond between us, a silent language understood as our unspoken bond just grew with every moment we shared. And yet, that question always hovered between us: Were we just sharing an insignificant long-distance connection?

I got steady. I tried not to let my thoughts spiral out of control. There was just no denying that everything about him felt so very right.

We were laughing together, and when we did that, it felt as if we were the only two people in the world. In all our desires to do everything and anything, he made me feel

heard in a way no one had ever before. He had a way of making me feel that I mattered, that I was worth his time.

But yet, I waited. I told myself that it did not matter whether he asked me out or not, because we were spending time together in any case, enjoying each other's company. But deep down I knew I felt like I was still waiting for that moment-a moment when he would finally cross that invisible line and make it official. I wasn't so sure when this was going to happen or whether it would, but a hope somehow would not stop kicking; just maybe, he was waiting for that too.

There were times when everything around me would dissipate, and at that moment, all that mattered was his being there. Not even just because of the way he smiled at me or because he always seemed to know what to say to perk up my spirits. It ran far deeper, some unexplainable connection that lingered between us. Something about being in his presence felt absolutely right, as if the world made sense for once in a way I had been yearning for all along. It made me question-was it possible I just found what I never knew I was looking for all along?

For hours, we passed time together talking about everything and nothing. His voice was soothing, and the more I learned about him, the more I admired how he saw the world. Perfect he was not, but somehow that just made him more real. I began to believe in destiny-that fate just had to bring these two people together at the right time. With him and in his eyes, I could finally be myself; I didn't have to fake anything anymore or tuck parts of myself away. That was somehow comforting, and there was a peace that was hard to explain.

But too many barricades existed even in this connection that I so desperately wanted to believe.

Chapter 3: Nikhat

I'm tired of trying to fit into your world.' The. Despite inviting me in, I feel like an invisible face in the corner of a packed room while you entertain everyone else.

I wrapped my biggest giggle,' he sighed.

"Thanks, that's great for you." I said softly, "You're always there and a little busy at the party.

It's captivating, yes. But what about me? Could it be that I'm just clapping in the background during your show, like an average viewer?

Although his voice was soft, he didn't appear overly concerned. "But I enjoy being alone..."

I remarked, "I've noticed it," my voice was somewhat bitter. "When you're not performing for the world, when only we are present, I witness your innermost being."

The small, quiet moments. Your partially grimace when you notice me staring at you. Your deliberate tracing of your fingers across my palm, like it's natural in nature. Are you able to distinguish those parts from yours?

"You're overpowering this, Mick."

"I asked savagely, "Does it not feel right?"."

Do you think I should be in the limelight too? Just to feel seen, I'm asking for minimal compensation. Like my voice matters. The issue here is not about me recognizing your worth, but rather about how you seem to overlook my presence at times. The conversation with your friends becomes an hour-long performance, and I am left as the

girlfriend who is always on the sidelines. The kind I vowed I would never become.

His frustration and anger finally surfaced as he asked "What do you want me to do, Nikhat?".

"My answer is uncertain, but I am aware that your words are more profound than what you initially believed," I said.

And your silence afterward? It causes me to spiral, replaying every moment in my mind. Everything I didn't say is overshadowing my own. I have made every effort to keep saying that we are still alive. Do you feel it, too? Or is it just me?"

He stared at me, silent.

"These things seem small, but they remain firm on my chest for a considerable time after happening," I exclaimed.

Imagine walking into a gap in the pavement and contemplating whether it marks the start of canyons.

He began by saying "nikk", but I intervened and stopped him.

With his arms reaching out, he moved closer to the ground. Despite the moment, his constant embrace and touching of my face served as a means to bring inner peace. I didn't aim to calm down, instead of addressing the issues that caused us to become so isolated. But a hug wouldn't fix what needed to be done.

My voice filled with desperation and shivers as I asked, "Are you listening?".

He muttered, "We'll get past the blockage."

"It's better we keep silent and avoid talking," I said, shaking my head.

He paused. "Let's not discuss this matter." I snapped in response.

I looked at him with a blank stare. "Very well.". Do you think that the solution lies in avoiding conversation?

He firmly stated that there was no difficulty.

After that point, we had a conversation, but the words were too much for me to handle.

That answer left me speechless.. It's unusual for someone like me, but the next few hours, my thoughts were spinning in uncontrollably. My thoughts spiraled deeper and deeper into my mind during nighttime. It appeared to others that I had shifted into a morning person. The reality was that I had not slept, which was far from being true.

The ceiling fan would make me sit in a state of rest for hours, its slow rotation reminding me of the darkness in my mind. No thought of anything, no idea of where to look, nothing. Nevertheless, at 7 a.m, I was consistently getting up and out of bed, looking like someone who was about to start their day. Nobody could guess that I had been awake since 4 a.m... and struggling to accept the weight of my choices, which was so overwhelming at the time."

The initial scuffle always seems like the most intense exchange of blows, but I never imagined it would leave me questioning everything. If you end up with two different people after agreeing to be in a relationship, it's easy to imagine where things could potentially go wrong. And so I held onto a little optimism, taking literally everything that was on the table of me.". Out of all the expert opinions I sought, there was only one person's words that provided comfort. "Give it some time," he said with a voice that resonated with someone who had seen heartbreak heal and wounds become more tender over time.

Consequently, I determined that only a few weeks are enough. The question of whether this is going anywhere can be asked in six months. My chest tightened as much as I rationalized the situation. Six minutes was dreadful; six months felt like eternity. Every day, I felt a greater sense of fear and uncertainty.

The first few weeks were a blur of confusion. After a while, I was lost in the unfamiliar landscape of this new life when my best friend came to my rescue, shining like saber. He's the one I would shoot down. What should I do? The advice given by him was unambiguous and truthful- "Tell him that you are wasting your time.". You're not present to recite the same discussions. If hope is absent, I'd say let it go.

Despite being barely noticeable, it was still enough to keep me from breaking free. Suddenly, everything seemed to be going smoothly, and I could see some stability in this relationship. It was a brief moment when I thought, "He may be aware that you understand.". Maybe there's hope.

Hope is a complex concept that provides you with an incentive to stay where you are, even when other signals suggest otherwise. The confusion was suffocating. My thoughts were racing through my mind, as if I was about to burst into flames.

Despite the inexplicable journey, I couldn't fathom how I ended up in this place. Even so, I kept the memory of my affirmation for that night alive.

It was November 6th. We spent hours conversing and wandering through the sky. Thank goodness. The memory haunts me as if it was from yesterday.". We were meant to leave, but we decided to walk instead. What happened? The night wore on, and my trust in him increased, my belief in love increased. The feeling of peace that I had not felt in years was present and unreachable. No doubts, no

suspicious for one night. The certainty of him and us was mine.'

But that feeling didn't last. It was a day full of overthinking and regret.'... It made me wonder why I was so foolish and unwise. All the relationships I had, regardless of their absurdity or short-lived, always seemed to bring me happiness. Even in the most challenging circumstances, time would seem to go by quickly. But this one was different. I spent every day feeling overwhelmed by my own insecurity and his emotional vulnerability.

Despite the occasional loss of significance, there were moments when it was all worth it. December 6th was when I truly celebrated our progress of three months. My laughter and my dance were indecent, but I still held onto the small achievement. Nevertheless, my heart felt like it was going to be short-lived.

The intensity of our relationship was mostly 80-20. It was even on bad days, about 20-20 and I barely held on. However, on his less favorable days, it was 100-0. He'd swerve towards himself, leaving me to bear the weight of everything alone for days. It was exhausting. I felt like I was pouring water from a cup that had no purpose other than to keep it alive.

Something held me in that place, but I couldn't leave him unaided. Maybe it was hope. Maybe it was fear. It could be that I had found solace and care in someone else for the first time. It's ironic that the person was not my boyfriend. His lack of expression and sagacious nature was noticeable. Nevertheless, he was not required to be. His words were too powerful to be spoken with the power of his actions. His silence revealed his complete lack of emotions in my boyfriend. He was everything to me.

It was a peculiar, unsettling realization. The person I saw caught my attention as I sought the stability and protection he provided. This was deeply personal. The relationship I was in was still present, and I couldn't let it go. The thought that things would improve persisted in my efforts.

Days transformed into weeks, and months became the length of time. Every passing day brought forth fresh difficulties, new uncertainties, fresh reasons to leave and fresh demands to depart. I was stuck in a perpetual state of uncertainty, caught between my desires and what I already had. There were moments of clarity, brief glimpses when I recognized the truth for what it was. Despite my efforts, the fear of losing my small group and belonging to him made them feel uneasy. The anxiety that ensued was a cherry on the side of the cake.

The sensation of settling into life persisted for some time. Despite everything that had occurred, I found a sense of order and tranquility. My fate was not predetermined by the universe, as it usually does.

I wanted to fix it. I really did.

When I departed from that debate, every word, moment, and eye contact made between us was replayed. Was I being too sensitive? Was I expecting too much? I loathed the constant thoughts of myself, the endless cycle of self-doubt that kept me up at night. The doubts that plagued me were unfounded in terms of my determination to continue.

I declined to get in touch with him that night, and he didn't call. Although it may seem small, I was weary of being the one fixing things all the time. I hoped he would give it a shot this time to prove that I was not just 'just fucking me out of life' and that my worth was beyond his.

His name was displayed on my phone screen the next afternoon, ending the silence. I paused briefly, staring at the call before picking up my phone.

His tone was softer than usual when he said "Hey, can we talk?".

I could have retorted, but there was something in his voice that stopped me. He sounded unsure, almost vulnerable.

"Sure," I replied.

A small café was where we met. The place was simply a spot where we could sit opposite each other and attempt to resolve the issues we had encountered. When he did have his usual coffee, I just sipped on tea and my stomach was too heavy for anything else.

Starting off with a nervous tone, he said: "I can't help but think about how I make you feel like an idiot last night.

And I kept quiet, expecting him to move on.

"I had no idea it was that bad," he stated.

You know that, right?".

I nodded off, but there was a desire within me to question the significance of intent when the outcome was identical.

"If I've caused you to feel unimportant, I apologize." He continued. "That's the ultimate outcome for me." The speaker agreed. But who else?

It was a first step, and I wanted to have faith in him.

Over the course of an hour-long conversation, we exposed everything from our troubles to our small-scale fears. We spoke about these things for hours on end. According to him, he had difficulty keeping everything in order and would sometimes become so consumed by the noise of his world that it was hard to believe.

His eyes met mine, he said: "I don't want to lose you.

At one point, it appeared he had.

Instead of nodding off, he started asking me about my day and listening more. By picking up my favorite snacks and texting me good morning, he would make small gestures. While hanging out with his pals, he would involve me in the discussion and prevent me from being left behind.

I appreciated the effort. The feeling was that we were finally getting to know each other, and it seemed like this was just a temporary patch in the road. Although I hoped we were on the same page, cracks can deepen even when attempts are made to fix them.

At times, I felt like a peripheral figure. When he would cancel plans at the last minute due to something more significant happening. He would often respond with a disengaged "that's great" before switching it up when I shared something that excited me.

I attempted to avoid being bothered by it. Relationships weren't perfect, right? It was stated by everyone that it required work, compromise, and patience. So I kept trying. I gave up on the minor things and emphasized being helpful. My thoughts resurfaced, reflecting on the reasons I fell in love with him and the way he softened his tears during laughter or showed me how a loving husband could make me feel safe when I was afraid.

Despite my efforts, I was not fulfilling my expectations.

After finishing up my days in classes, I organized a little dinner for us and wanted to surprise him. We had just finished dinner. My walk involved practicing how to announce my article's publication in the monthly magazine and celebrate with him. He perceived a mixture of surprise and irritation in his face when they saw me.

Holding the takeout bag, said: "Hey I thought he'd save you from making mess food tonight, just for."

After I spread my arms, I anticipated he would embrace me and turned to head towards our destination. "You should have made the call."

His tone was not characterized by anger, but it wasn't warm.

"I wished it would be unexpected," I said softly. "You don't seem happy to see me." What happened next.

He quickly replied, "It's not that," but he acknowledged that a lot is happening at the moment.

Work stuff, you know."

My stomach reacted when I nodded, suggesting that there was more to it than what I had initially done.

The food was consumed without any sound, not at our designated spot, but at the closest eatery nearby, and there were awkward exchanges. He responded politely but not enthusiastically when I mentioned my article, as if he was only partially attentive.

When I stepped out, I felt more deflated than I had in weeks.

It wasn't just that night. Whenever that happened, small increments began to accumulate, gradually taking away the hope I held dear. The feeling was that his attempts were primarily motivated by a desire to succeed, rather than actual goals.

It was then that I and his anger came into play. I loathed him for making me feel like I had to battle with myself to get his attention, for his hard work. The fact that I had high hopes was met with resentment from him, as his mistakes were pointed out.

We'd have good days, sure. Moments when the worst was approaching and we resumed our laughter and conversation. Despite this, the challenging times persisted, conflict escalated, and excuses seemed meaningless in isolation.

At a party hosted by one of his buddies, there was no final outcome. I had given up on going, but I still had a week of deadlines to complete. He said we would leave early, but as the night wore on it was clear it wasn't going to happen.

I observed him in a group of individuals, sharing jokes and receiving attention. Upon my attempt to engage him in conversation, he responded with "Just a minute."

It was a complete waste of time, and by the time we left, I couldn't manage. The minute had passed.

We walked back and I snapped, "Are you both concerned?".

He was clearly irritated and asked, "What's your topic?".

I'm talking about how I waited for hours to show you what happened.

I've been waiting for a while, hoping you'll treat me well and make me feel important. »

"Nikhat, I won't do this again," he grumbled.

Chapter 4: Fateh

I always seem to be someone who thinks they know everything about me. Being a BBA gold medalist, entrepreneur's son, and founder of NGOs is enough to make me feel like I have achieved great things. What are some examples? But the truth? I feel like I'm on the brink of failure, unsure about when to expect anything in life. It's best to start with the beginning.

X.Y. is not solely an accomplished businessman; his son has earned the title of "businessman.". He's got a name that goes in every boardroom and his shake of hand is almost like 'yes,' to half of the startups in Mumbai. When I was a kid, I thought he was bigger than life. I still admire the way he takes control of a room, his voice carrying authority without ever having to shout.

However, the fact remains that being the offspring of a man like that is not for the fainthearted. You can only hope to be your father's billionaire if you follow his example. The expectation is for you to improve rather than just be good. I made an effort to embody myself for a period.' During my time in school, I was the standout student on every entrance exam and earned a gold medal in business school. Additionally, Every success was a step towards proving myself and earning his respect.'

When I revealed my desire to establish an NGO instead of being employed by him, everything hit a roadblock. "You're depriving yourself of your potential," he declared, without ever feeling the pride I had been seeking. There was a certain look on his face that day, as if I were some unknown person who had just entered his house. The reason for my disappointment was not anger, but rather a sense of

disgrace towards the family due to Xyz's legacy. And honestly, that was worse.

Nonetheless, I couldn't let it stop me. It's likely that I was born with a stubborn nature. He passed it on to me. I can always go back once I've got my fix. I sometimes feel like crap out there because I think about it a lot. The demands of managing an NGO, creating a legacy that is not my father's, and meeting expectations since I was born can be overwhelming. In these quiet times, when the world seems to take its course and I can breathe, self-doubt creeps in.". Sometimes, I feel like I'm following an imaginary dream, if not completely unattainable. That lingering uncertainty, that mental construct, has the potential to choke me.

Before I launched Second Leash, I remember the last thing I said to my dad. I had inquired if he would be willing to assist me. He stared at me for a long time, as if he was trying to read something in my eyes, something 'off' or something that didn't matter. Why? He sighed deeply and stated, "Don't assume that I'll sacrifice something for some utopian dream.".

And that was it. His support was based on certain conditions. I couldn't comprehend why I didn'T want to follow in his footsteps, he wanted to take control of the empire. Yet, I didn't want to be a mere member of egotrictric machinery. I was after something more than just that, something with a significant purpose. My goal was to create change and help others in the same way that Bruno had helped me.

Bruno.

My relationship with Bruno wasn't just as romantic as my love for dogs. The moment I laid eyes on him, he was simply an infant with a fearful demeanor and walking around in the streets. His suffering made the world unforgiving.

Upon returning, I made a commitment to ensure he never felt abandoned. Despite the challenges of his recovery, it was a miracle to be brought back to health.

After watching Bruno transform from an inquisitive, underfed pup to a loyal friend, I was moved by the power of second thoughts. A new life was offered instead of saving a dog. Feeling 'absolutely blessed' to give Bruno the love and care he was entitled to, something really deep inside me.

I was driven by that feeling to pursue my current passion. I was aware that I couldn't just cease my association with him. Like I did with Bruno, there were many animals that needed someone to fight for them.

In fact, contrary to popular belief, this journey didn't commence in a boardroom or business class lecture hall. It all began in the backyard of our family home, where I was 12 years old.

Managing an NGO is a challenging task. This isn't a glamorous profession, and it's not something that automatically earns you respect or admiration. The act of rescuing a dog from the street or finding rehoming for one of our shelter animals means we don't have to go through the ticker tape display. Usually, I feel like I'm swimming against the current and not showing any significant movement. Endless meetings with donors who promise everything but don't deliver, endless bureaucratic hurdles that impede progress, the ongoing battle for funding — it's exhausting.

And it's lonely. I didn't expect that part. It's surprising how isolated I was. The dogs I love can sometimes be too distant to understand me. They don't judge me. They don't ask for explanations. The only things they seek are love, attention and care. They have no interest in naming their children, degrees or legacy. They just want a chance. There

are times when I experience the same desperation. A chance. All I desire is an opportunity to demonstrate that I am capable and sufficient.

I have accomplished a lot, which is ironic. Gold medal in BBA? Check.

Launched an NGO? Check. My progress is steady but my every move backwards feels like a quick jab. My emotional state improves as I continue to progress and advance. Sometimes, I feel like I'm only getting better when I don't realize it. My heart races when I have to speak before donors or attend a press conference. Despite practicing my lines and expressions, I experience anxiety when being in the limelight. Why is that? My entire self is at risk of being destroyed by the fear of failure that always lurks behind me.

And then there's the guilt. The remorse of not meeting my father's standards. Each day it bites me. There's an internal drive within me to disavow him and prove that my approach is equally valid as his. My inner voice is constantly fighting, saying, "Maybe I'm hearing the correct word.". Maybe you're wasting your potential.”.

That sense of incompetence is tough to overcome. The world where success is determined by profit margins and power plays, rather than compassion or service, can be challenging. But I can't help it. My belief is that life goes beyond financial gain and status. I aim to have a genuine reputation that surpasses the endurance of corporate realms."". I aim to establish a legacy of love, second chances, and transformation.

As I lay on the couch, I gaze at Bruno with his eyes half-closed, as if he's waiting for me to exit it. It's amazing how a simple, pure-hearted dog like Bruno can bring humour. Bravo. My closest companion, he's been my voice, his proof that life goes beyond achievements and accolades. ". It's

about bonding, concern, and small victories..... Such as when we saved a litter of puppies from rotting in the street or found repopulate an old dog after his owner left him alone.

The setbacks are worth the time and effort. I find myself reflecting on why I chose to adopt dogs when I see them wagging their tails and receiving a warm embrace from their owners. But the struggle remains. Everyday becomes another day, a new level of challenge. At times, I feel like giving up. Upon my decision to announce my departure to the world. But I have an inner strength that doesn't let go of me. I am aware that I cannot do it when animals are dependent on me.

At times, I feel like I'm missing out on something because of my team spirit and the fierce loyalty I have within them. Do they see a leader? A visionary? Do people simply imagine someone attempting to fake keeping their head above water? I don't know. My fear, anxiety, and constant questioning are beyond my understanding. They probably don't.

It's a common trait that anxiety is hidden. It's a sneaky thing. The self-advertising process doesn't involve flashing lights or loud noises. Slowly creeping up your pants, it's like the weight of death that settles in from nowhere. It's something I've always been good at hiding. My approach is to wear it like a piece of armor, trying to convince everyone, including myself, that I'm capable of handling everything.

Outside, I appear calm, confident and focused. However, the reality is entirely separate from it. Each time you receive an email from a potential sponsor, it feels like your life is being wasted. When one of our programs doesn't succeed, I hear my dad say something to me in my mind. Despite this, he still has feelings for me. Why? He does, I am aware of it. His affection has been predetermined, based on achievements

and milestones. I am unable to match the level of perfection in my character that he desires.

But I'm not. Not always. I'm apprehensive about the concept of failure. It's like I'm being stalked. In case I am unsuccessful, what's my fault? Someone who was a millionaire and couldn't live up to the expectations they had set for themselves, is it really just me? If Second Leash falls on me, does that mean I have failed as a person? Shouldn't I be disrespected, admired or loved?

I wish I had the knowledge. My wish is to discover a magical solution that can make everything work out. The truth is, there are no straightforward answers. The burden of feeling anxious is slowly dissolving, and there's no single solution to it. I am unable to communicate with my father about it. Why? "I cannot approach him and offer my help." It's not possible. To him, it would be a sign of being defeated and asking for help. And I refuse to let that happen. My son's failure and inability to live up to the family name are not my responsibility.

And so, I keep going. Day after day, I keep pushing forward, aware that the road ahead won't be smooth. In the end, it could be worth a while. I'm too old to go back now. Why? It seems unlikely that I would ever contemplate ending it, given the magnitude of the situation. This isn't just about me. Give these untamed creatures a chance!... It's about proving that kindness can make all the difference.

I'm uncertain if I will become the person my father has envisioned for me. I'm gradually acknowledging that it's possible. Good, but not certain. Maybe I'm not a necessary person to be in the world of him. Possibly, I must follow my own path, make mistakes, and create something that matters. This is what it takes.

While shifting, Bruno extends himself to me and emits a gentle grunt. I smile to myself. Maybe my understanding isn't entirely clear. But I've got this. One day at a time.

A quote I read recently made me realize that courage doesn't always come with a soundtrack of cheeriness. Sometimes, the silent statement of "I'll try again tomorrow" is what courage seems to be for me..... Each day is filled with uncertainty and the possibility of finally resolving matters.

Sometimes, when the pressure is on to put through enough of this stuff I start thinking about how it was just a little boy and he was scared and hungry. He was a small creature, disillusioned by the lack of shelter and warmth in Mumbai's cold streets. With his ribs sticking out from his black, matted fur and wide fearful eyes, I wonder if it was me as a 12-year-old. Thank you! It's recalled to me that day, I found him slumped in the middle of the road with a cold sweat, too weak to call for help. He and I were both unaware of what was yet to come. There would be days when he could run with me, healthy and full of life, but lacked the knowledge that anything could bring him down except for survival.

Seeing him in that state made my day as a child soar. I had always been distinct from my peers in terms of my sensitivity and sense of empathy, but watching Bruno's suffering stirred up a strong emotional reaction within me. Leaving him alone and abandoned was not an option for me. It felt like the universe was giving me an opportunity to demonstrate my worthiness and ability.

The amount of work required to restore his health was unknown to me when I took him in. Over the course of several nights, I stayed by his side, providing him with leftovers until he could live independently, taking care of infections, and showing him all my love. It wasn't easy. I had a few instances where my emotions were strained, and

I believed it might be too late. Despite obstacles, Bruno persevered and transformed into the most exceptional dog I had ever witnessed. I held onto my resilience and unwavering fortitude.

I owe him numerous compliments for the fire he ignited in me. He could potentially overcome the worst that came with a certain degree of difficulty. In the event that he could come back from death, I might be able to overcome my own doubts and insecurity. Despite the darkness, he served as a beacon of hope that something could be done. As I see it, a second chance for someone willing to fight for their freedom is what this phrase signifies.

Every time I step through the door following a hectic day, I hear him before I even see him. His paws racing against the ground, his breath fast and exultant.'... At that point, it seems like the world comes to a close, and only the connection between us matters. He's always waiting for me, his tail wagging fiercely, as if my return is the highlight of his day. The world doesn't mind as he is thoroughly excited, and his smile is unrelentingly infectious. There are only a handful of things in my life that make me feel authentic and consistent.

Those are the moments when I realize how much Bruno has affected me. He has been my pillar of strength, going to and from one moment to the next. My faith in him has been reinforced by the knowledge that it's always worth living. Seeing him brightens up my often quiet and empty house."'. His presence is a kind and unwavering anchor that provides me with comfort during times of uncertainty.

I grimacing, bending over to scratch behind his ears as he jumps up, his face filled with uncontrollable happiness. That moment brings the day's anxieties to a peaceful end. It's a subtle reminder that I'll keep fighting as long as he stays

with me, regardless of the outcome. For the dogs. For the cause. For the life I've chosen. Possibly, I should also consider it for myself. However,

My mind races to remember why I initiated this action every time I encounter him. It wasn't only his inspiration that prompted me to start an NGO or fight for the animals that have been forgotten. I was motivated by him to resist the pressure and doubt myself. Despite the challenges, he taught me that there is hope. ". As long as we exist, there is always a possibility for us to have another opportunity. A second leash. A new beginning.

It's all worth it. Despite the difficult times, when all else seems lost. Bruno's experience has taught me that the fight is never over. I'll always have the courage to face any situation that comes my way, as long as he stays with me.

Chapter 5: Nikhat

My sweater felt cold and chilly as the evening progressed, with only slight chills falling. I was seated on the bench outside the campus library, with my hands resting on a paper cup of coffee that had been cold for ages. It felt a bit murky and muted, as though I were underwater, immersed in the sound of my last brawl with him. They echoed in my mind like the sound of cutting glass.

He rolled his eyes and said, "Not here again," as if his feelings were too much to bear.

Just like that, we were back to where we started.

I breathed deeply, observing the bright hue of the night sky. I didn't want to cry. Not here. Not over this.

Can you explain why you look like someone has taken your pet goldfish?

The familiar voice pierced my self-pity, and I gazed upwards at Pratyush, hands on his regular black pants, with an odd expression of laughter and worry.

I mused, "You don't even like goldfish."

He grinned. "True. I'm not feeling the 'classic-Nikhat golden retriever' vibe at all. What's wrong?"

The unashamed and straightforward gaze of Pratyush made it impossible to avoid his queries. It was one of the reasons he was my best friend.' With a deep breath, I moved him to sit. Unexpectedly, he settled down beside me, his shoulder gently pressing against mine in a consoling manner.

"It's him," I said finally.

Pratyush didn't need a name. He gave a nod, as if he had been anticipating this.

"Another fight?"

I gave a nod. "A massive one," I almost choked and burst into tears. Despite the fight, my eyes didn't well up and I felt like there was no one else willing to do it. It was like we were in a fairytale again.

"He slatted back, his feet touching the ground before him. "Do you want to ask me about this, or will I just move on?" He asked.

I was able to laugh at that. "I'll give you the hint first, then give me some advice."

His embraces provided me with a sense of relief that I had not anticipated. They were a still promise, reassurances that said, "I'm here — no judgments, no conditions, and no doubt.". With you, always."

I told him everything. Each time I attempted to convey my emotions, it was met with an argument and frustration, leaving me feeling invisible. I was hopeful that things would get better, but they never did. I disclosed to him the phone conversation that took place after dinner, and his voice seemed distant and unengaging.

Pratyush remained composed and serious while listening. His face was unusually serious. At last, I heard him blow a low whistle.

"Wow.

Okay."

"You mean really, doesn't it?" I asked, my heart racing.

He swiftly replied that the situation was not bad, but it was more intricate. He followed his preferred routine of poking his hair.

His preference was to groom his hair every three minutes to ensure he sees the most stunning light brown eyes a few months after falling in love. "Nikhat, I'm not exactly dependable in relationships, right?"

"I'm going to ask you for it," I said sarcastically, raising my eyebrow. He was truly the only one I could count on.

"OK, okay." he shrugged. But then they said: 'You're not only talking about a fight.

You're talking about patterns. An unvarying argument. Overnight fixes are not an option.

Upon looking at my coffee cup, I traced the edge with my thumb and asked for guidance. Just give up?"

Without hesitation, he replied with a firm "No" and not until they knew there was nothing left to fight for.

Your affection for him is evident, so it's important to make an effort. Relationships don't fix themselves, Nikhat. Love doesn't just... stay. It's not a self-sustaining, flawless thing, no matter how robust it appears initially. It requires effort to work at it. Both of you. When it starts to crack, you must nurture it, fight for it and sometimes rebuild it.

With my hands moving involuntarily towards the edge of mine, I sighed. "I'm making an effort to do better.". I keep trying. I express my emotions to him, try to communicate with him and give him space, but his gaze remained unclear. I ran away, feeling an inexplicable sense of pain. "He doesn't get it.". I feel like he's not paying attention, as if my voice is being heard. When I bring it up, he refers to it as 'drama' or accuses me of overthinking. What strategies can I use to

motivate myself when it feels like no one is contributing to my progress?

Then, with his face lowered slightly, Pratyush looked serious and acknowledged: "Yes, I understand." It's a burden to have the entire thing on your shoulders. Can we ask for your understanding before discussing it with him? Not in the midst of a conflict or moment, but in harmony when you both are willing to listen attentively. Can we make him comprehend the consequences of his actions and what do we expect from him? Please elaborate. If he's not willing to meet you in the same way, it may be time to reconsider. Before making that decision, it's important to give a sincere and honest effort.

"He ceases," Pratyush finished for me.

I nodded, blinking back tears.

His voice remained calm as he slowly spoke. "Are you seeking a resolution or are they just talking about things?"

I hesitated. "I don't know. Both, maybe?"

Pratyush spoke with a calm yet firm voice, saying, "That's the thing." Despite being similar to the effect of expending steam from a pressure cooker, it doesn't produce any results. Venting can be a powerful tool in dealing with someone who is already lacking in communication. Your feelings are not insignificant, but your approach to the discussion can be pivotal. Why? When the situation seems like an attack or a list of their mistakes, they will become defensive.

As I closed my eyes, I sighed deeply. "What do you think I'm doing?" Would you rather be quiet and pretend to have everything in order?

"Understanding, you approach it differently." He shook his head and replied: "No. Not at all".

Narrowed my eyes I asked, "How. what is different?

Starting small was the starting point, he said leaning back in his seat as though to be part of a mastermind. "Rather than trying to bombard him with everything at once, try to concentrate on one thing." The speaker responded positively.

Pick something specific, something manageable. Hearing so many complaints, whether they're legitimate or not — it's overwhelming for anyone. "... Focusing on one aspect leads to a greater likelihood of getting his attention.".

Even though I frowned, what if it turns out he didn't notice? Doesn't it make a difference?

It's important to communicate what you want from your partner instead of just expressing your frustration. ".

Pratyush suggested that one can make a different choice by saying, "I'd rather spend my Saturday with you than telling you.". The first sounds like objection, while the second feels akin to an offer. » Being cognizant of your requirements gives him something tangible to put their minds to. It facilitates his ability to connect with you more effectively.

Biting my lip, I took in his words. "And what if he doesn't??".

With a soft voice, he said: "You'll be glad you tried everything, but sometimes it's just too much.".

I gazed at him with excitement. "That sounds plausible.".

The speaker stated that it's not just the words spoken but also the manner in which they are uttered.

He will feel attacked if you bring him a list of complaints. If you consider it a joint project, he will be more inclined to listen.

Nodding slowly, I allowed him to speak.. My attempts to communicate were not insignificant, it could be that I hadn't been communicating correctly. Nonetheless,

Speaking softly, Pratyush said: "You have to be honest with yourself Nikhat."?...

Is he also contributing to the effort? It's not just about being. It is a two-way street.?...

I muttered, "I acknowledge," but that's what scared me.

What if I'm the only one fighting for this?

He said, "You'll be aware and understand." At least it's not a painful experience, but at least you can avoid spending time on an unsuitable thing.

Prior to embarking on it, you must give your best shot. In that manner, you'll never regret anything.

I swallowed deeply, avoiding the possibility of spilling tears. "You make it sound so effortless." What made you do that?

He smiled and said, "It's not bad, but it'll be worth it."

The good stuff always is."

We sat in silence, watching the sun set beneath the clouds. The campus erupted in the background, with students conversing and laughter being heard nearby.

I finally said "Thanks Pratyush," my voice remained soft and composed.

He leaned over my shoulder saying, "Bas, how can I get him to do me a trick from the food court?"

I screamed with anger, "Don't make fun of my unpaid cash!" and then declined.

"Okay sorry.

At least get me chai. It appears as though the liquid in your cup has been dead for hours.

When I let loose, the sound was a lighter and more tranquil sensation than it had been in days.

As we made our way towards the campus cafe, I felt a sense of optimism and hope. Maybe the situation wasn't as serious as it looked. There is a chance that there was still resolving this issue.

Despite my desire to maintain optimism, I felt a growing weight on my chest. Could we have possibly sorted out this relationship? Is it possible that I was holding onto something that was becoming increasingly difficult to obtain?

We headed to the café, ordered drinks, and found a quiet spot to sit while listening to Pratyush's repeated thoughts in my mind. The recommendation he gave was straightforward, to the point of being quite irritating: Begin with a small project. Be specific. Provide him with the information you need, not just what's problematic.

It made sense. Too much sense, really. Maybe that's the reason for my fear. If it was that simple, why didn't I think of it?

Because I was hurt.

I had to face it and hide the uncomfortable truth that... I had become so consumed with thoughts of his failures and shortcomings that I couldn't even see the point in my approach. I was venting, transferring all my anger to him, and hoping that he would comprehend my situation.

Relationships are not functioning in that manner.

The window was filled with students rushing and hurling, and I watched them from the side. A few giggled with their

buddies, while others were transported to their own worlds through headphones. They all seemed so self-assured and relaxed, causing me to feel jealous.

“Start small,” Pratyush had said.

I mean, that was easy to hear. The point was not just to start small, but also to let go of the need to always be correct. *This is what I need from you.* And vulnerability wasn't something I'd been good at lately. The way I had framed my words as an attack on myself, the fact that I never paid attention to them, made me wonder why they didn't put in more effort.

I chuckled, thinking about how he must have understood those words. Unacceptable; offensive, blaming and not compatible with. What could have been the same for me if I were like him? Was my motivation to change, or would I have been complacent like he was? (Or else)

The answer was obvious. Still, part of me resisted. Why should I be the one to make a change? Why does he struggle to make sense of it all without any assistance?

That notion seemed like a delusion. However, A justification for staying stuck. The relationship's success could only be achieved by making an effort, Pratyush'.... the other hand. I gave him both, but the effort was so significant that it made him feel acknowledged and appreciated.

The thought made me uneasy. It was my duty to advocate for our cause and urge for discussions. Yet, I found myself being told that I was not following the correct protocol. Nevertheless, It felt unfair. Didn't love have to be an unjust form of affection?

Love isn't about keeping score. It's not about determining the right or wrong. It's all about finding a way to meet up, even when it feels like the middle of nowhere.

As I drank, my thoughts were guided by the warmth of our favourite chai.

What if Pratyush's words were true? Rather than trying to unblock everything, what would I do? Simple as asking him to spend a day together, or telling him I miss him and not blame me.

Would it make a difference?

Maybe. Maybe not. Yet I could be certain that I exerted myself.

My thoughts were consumed by the realization that I had wished he had taken a different step. Accidental abandonments, sourdieu, his distant demeanor even when we were sitting together. What happened? They had piled up, like stones, and built some sort of wall between us. ". Do walls have the ability to remain in place during the night? They're dismantled piece by piece.

Maybe I wasn't obligated to fix everything in one go, but that's not my strong suit. One thing can be the starting point for fixing everything.

My thoughts turned back to Bruno, the dog that Fateh had rescued and raised. Probably too much to tell you, but I've been keeping him a secret for the time being. Fateh, though? He's a bothersome person, let alone one to ignore. Don't be bothered: I was deeply affected by the story of Bruno, as it made me realize how difficult it was to come back to him after his initial breakup with Fateh. Does the nature of relationships vary from one person to another? They require the same things as time, patience, and love.

What if I was not on the same page as him?

That inquiry persisted, weighty and unyielding. If I made a sacrifice, altered my approach, and opened up more deeply, what would occur?

There was an opportunity that I couldn't neglect. The words spoken by Pratyush stuck in my head: You can be sure that you gave everything. Smarty Pratty, I thought he had all the answers.

It had an unusual comfort.' The. Being aware of my contribution and effort would make it easier to leave, if necessary.

Walking away?

Upon coming to the realization, my chest tightened. I hoped it wouldn't happen. Despite everything, I had the same love for him. This was still something I hoped would be successful in. The fact that I still yearned for it may have been the most significant factor.

There are times when relationships don't last forever. But I wasn't about to abandon this one....

The laughter emanated from a table just beyond my hearing. My screen time was limited as Pratyush was reading on his phone, allowing me to recall everything we had said. His friendship made me appreciate his ability to convey emotions without relying on sweet language. I looked at him with gratitude.

The silence was broken as I said thank you..

With eyebrows raised up, he gazed upward. "What?".

"For being honest with me.

My perspective has been altered by...

Soft, knowing smiles he had as if his advice fromikhat has been used only."...

I chuckled and shook my head. "Yeah, okay.". I'll work on it."

Whenever Pratyush dropped me off, I felt lighter as we finished our chai and made it back to my room. I didn't have all the answers, but I don't need to. This is not necessary.

That's the first thing I had to do."

While in bed that night, I opened my notes app and began to write down the things I wanted to say to him. A list of grievances, not everything, but one or two particulars. Things that mattered.

I long for the presence of you."

This weekend, I would love to have dinner with just me.

The words were so fragile, it seemed almost uncomplicated, but maybe that was the point. Love isn't meant to be complicated. The aim was to foster a sense of connection and find ways to bridge the gap between two individuals, regardless of their physical distance.

I experienced a sudden surge of hope as I gazed at the words on the screen, feeling emptiness from my thoughts.

Maybe our brokenness was just a small part of the reason. Hope that there was still something to fight for. I closed my eyes and was ready to face anything that came after that thought.

Chapter 6: Nikhat

A peculiar feeling gripped me when I awoke during that morning.

Repetitions of Pratyush's advice from yesterday evening continued occupying my thoughts throughout my morning sleep. The maintenance of love requires dedication because it does not persist on its own. The absence of relationship worry during that morning was the first time in a long while.

Perhaps the reason behind my strange awakening went beyond all possibilities.

The situation required me to put an end to my repetitive pattern of quarrels and unfulfilling moments. I decided to leave my bedroom because I needed anything to push away thoughts about the failing relationship which had made my world contract into one narrow space.

I recalled Second Leash as the answer to my problems.

I discovered their page several nights previously while indulging in routine online aimless surfing. I had briefly wondered that day the post might work well as a magazine article. At this moment while sitting up in bed to view the ceiling I felt something bigger was at play.

The promotion hit exactly the spot I required.

A cause I could believe in. The undertakings lacked any connection to personal matters. Something bigger than me.

I opened my phone to view their webpage for the second time. The rescued dog pictures and adoption success stories as well as the behind-the-scenes work all brought a sincere

happiness to the viewing audience. Among all the posts there was a specific element that caught my full attention which was the naming of the creator.

A casual glance at the captions uncovered that he acted as both the primary leader and entire executive force of the organization. Each statement he shared expressed great dedication without becoming emotionally extravagant. Throughout his posts he delivered realistic information about the operation of his non-profit that presented the challenges in stark terms yet avoided defeatism. Negative messages directed me to the message application where I began to enter my words.

Hi! My name is Nikhat. I am an undergraduate journalism student studying at— Too formal.

I wiped out the draft and processed the document from scratch.

Hey! Your work has caught my attention through your page since I discovered it. I believe your organization does outstanding work. I work for my school magazine so I want to produce an article about Second Leash if you agree to this opportunity.

The button to send hung in front of my cursor. Would they even reply? The students showed no hesitation when I proposed to conduct a story about their organization through my college magazine coverage. I did not hesitate so I clicked the send button. Less than a moment later the notification appeared to confirm the message had been received. Then, the typing indicator. My heart jumped a little. Then, the reply:

Sure. When are you free to stop by?

That was it. No fuss, no hesitation. Just straight to the point.

I smiled. Tomorrow morning?

See you then.

I grabbed my bag while fixing my hair before starting on this new experience before I could start overthinking the plan. I embarked on my first experience of visiting Second Leash during a brilliant Saturday morning.

It was just another article. I considered this basic assignment for the magazine not important or noticeable when the editor proposed it but time has shown otherwise.

This city houses a non-profit organization which spends its efforts to recover and locate suitable homes for rescued stray dogs. The story appeared to possess the potential to become an interesting narrative. All the article concepts I researched for the last week failed to strike the right chord. This did.

I was immediately drawn to their page the moment I started browsing through it. Multiple aspects including their set of stories and before-after photos and the massive work investment demonstrated that this nonprofit represented a genuine stakeholder commitment rather than a fleeting initiative. Second Leash operated with clear foundations along with security and direction.

I left my apartment on that Saturday morning to visit their shelter because my fascination with the place surpassed my usual laziness. That morning brought sunny weather with gentle winds which gave me my first spark of genuine eagerness to write in several months.

The moment I entered the compact fenced shelter it was met by disarray of barking yelps and paw thuds. Every surface including barking and yelping and thudding paws created an energetic atmosphere I had not anticipated experiencing. The volunteers moved in synchronized

movements to keep tending to the dogs while cleaning the floors and shifting delivery bags. A feeling of tranquility emerged from this disorder. The pair of eyes suddenly caught my attention which had previously been only a minute before.

Fateh.

With his hands inside his tailored trousers he remained calm yet authoritative and slightly separate from other workers in the room. His presence had a power which could not be denied. His manner of presenting himself showed class through his nonchalant way of doing things. His dark wavy hair stood out by capturing light beams while his big shoulders emphasized the modest grey t-shirt in a way that made it look high-end quality and his gentle posturing showed restrained self-assurance rather than cocky behavior. My prince charm had never seemed real so I began mentally picturing him and his end result matched the handsome man standing in front of me.

At that moment I shifted my gaze towards him.

The encounter lacked a typical movie-like experience which would have made all sounds melt into silence as the world faded to obscurity. A brief silence interrupted the barking noises while the volunteers continued their work but hesitated for an instant. When your heart suddenly skips one of its beats it produces the familiar feeling one gets in such moments.

His look penetrated deep into my being without merely passing my direction. He suddenly paused when he noticed my stifled presence after which he gave me his smile.

“Hi,” he said, walking over. “You’re new.”

God, even his voice was something else. Deep, warm, laced with amusement.

I cleared my throat, gripping the strap of my bag a little tighter. “Uh, yeah. I’m Nikhat. I—”

I stopped, suddenly feeling ridiculous. What if he thought I was some random girl who had just shown up because I had nothing better to do?

But before I could fumble my way through an explanation, his smile widened slightly. “You’re the one who messaged us about writing a piece on us, right?”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Yeah. That’s me.”

He nodded, “Welcome to Second Leash, Nikhat. May I interest you in a café around the corner?” His voice carried the kind of effortless charm that could probably convince anyone of anything.

At that point, it was only a matter of seconds before I was guided through the main entrance, completely unaware of where this initial encounter would lead us to an entirely larger reality.

Situated on the edge of a quiet street, this coffee shop was small yet cozy. Fateh greeted me with a small bell above the coffee shop door and I entered. I was immediately enamored by the intense aroma of coffee beans, which hugged me like a glove. It was a place of little beauty, lined with wooden bookshelves and ceramic mugs, the kind of place where people could get lost in quiet conversations and take hold of stolen moments. Place where the world seemed to decelerate, conversations chimed into whispers, and the aroma of freshly made coffee spread throughout you like a soft kiss. The sweeping windows let in the morning sunlight, creating golden lines on the wooden tables and brightening up dust particles in mid-day. It was peaceful. We approached the small round table by the window, and

he looked up at it with an unreadable eye contact before moving towards the seat opposite. He didn't understand.

His voice was clear and businesslike as he asked, "What are you having?"

I barely had a chance to scan the menu before he made the decision for me. "A cappuccino," he told the barista, not even looking my way for confirmation.

I raised my eyebrow. "I made a confident decision.". What if I wanted something else?"

He finally looked at me then, his lips curving into something that wasn't quite a smile. "You look like a cappuccino person."

I wasn't sure whether to be amused or annoyed. Before I could decide, the barista returned with our drinks, setting the cup in front of me. The foam was dusted lightly with cocoa, the scent rising in gentle wisps of warmth.

"Thanks," I muttered, wrapping my hands around it.

Fateh leaned back in his chair, fingers tapping idly against his own cup. And then, just as I took my first sip, he spoke again—his voice still smooth, still calm.

"So," he said, his gaze locking onto mine, "let's get down to business."

I should have known. The moment felt too peaceful to last.

Seated across from me, sipping his coffee with an effortless ease, he looked like he'd stepped out of a well-curated daydream. The morning light played in his hair, catching in soft brown waves that curled just enough to look annoyingly perfect. His skin glowed in the bright yellow sun, his sharp jawline framed by the delicate contrast of

shadow and warmth. The man looked like he belonged in a cologne ad—polished, effortless, honestly edible.

If someone had asked me to describe my dream man, I wouldn't have had an answer. But if I had to conjure one up now? Well... he'd probably look like this.

And then, he opened his mouth. The moment my dream ended.

“Journalists are a damn headache,” he said, setting his cup down with an air of finality.

I blinked. “Excuse me?”.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, fingers laced together as he studied me. “Look, I'm sure you mean well, but I already know how this goes. A journalist walks in, asks a few deep, meaningful questions, writes a feel-good story about 'a noble man rescuing helpless animals,' and gets a pat on the back for shedding light on the 'plight of strays.' Meanwhile, nothing actually changes. Donations don't go up, adoptions don't increase, and we're left exactly where we started. You get your byline, and we get nothing.”.

I stared at him, my coffee untouched. Was this man for real?

He leaned back in his chair, completely at ease, while I sat there trying to process the absurdity of the situation. I had walked in expecting an insightful conversation about his work, a deeper look into the nonprofit that had caught my interest. Instead, I was met with hostility wrapped in politeness, a cup of coffee, and what felt like a pre-rehearsed speech on why people like me were the problem.

“I—” I started, but he cut me off, shaking his head as if he'd already predicted my next words.

“Look, I get it,” he said smoothly, swirling the coffee in his cup as he spoke. “You need a story.

You probably saw our page, thought it would make for a good human-interest piece. Maybe even a feature in whatever college magazine you write for.” He lifted his eyes to mine, sharp and unreadable, almost intimidating. “But here’s the thing, this organization? It’s not for show. It’s not some heartwarming tale for people to read and feel good about before they go back to their regular lives.”.

His words landed heavier than I expected, frustration creeping into his voice even though his posture remained relaxed. I opened my mouth to try and argue, but he wasn’t finished.

“You know how many journalists have sat where you’re sitting?

How many have promised exposure, awareness, some vague notion of ‘helping the cause’—only for us to see nothing change?” He let out a short laugh, though there was no humor in it. “People love stories about redemption. They love to hear about how the poor, broken street dogs got a second chance. They’ll ‘aww’ at the pictures, share the article, maybe even comment something nice.” His jaw tightened, his knuckles going white around his coffee cup. “And then? Nothing. Donations don’t come in. Volunteers don’t show up. And we’re left exactly where we started—struggling.”.

I swallowed, caught somewhere between shock and irritation. He wasn’t wrong—not entirely, at least. There were people who treated social causes like props for a feel-good article. But he’d painted me with the same brush before I had even gotten a chance to explain myself.

"I don't work like that," I said, my voice quieter than I wanted it to be.

His eyes twinkled back and forth at me, evaluating my argument. "I suppose. Maybe.". Perhaps it's not.' He exhaled deeply, shaking his head in frustration: 'But I can't take that chance.

And so I cracked open my jaw, hammered my nails into the fabric beneath my denim underwear. This was ridiculous. Upon sitting opposite me, Fateh was practically flawless, with his hair touching gold and his beard covering every inch of his face, making him a sight to behold. His presence demanded attention. He appeared as if he had been dreaming. But the words spoken by him? They were anything but dreamy.

The speaker expressed his lack of interest and shook his head. "Second Leash is not meant to be utilized for career advancement."

"We've never had a greater advantage than journalism, and I highly doubt it will ever improve.". I think you grouped me with every journalist you've ever met.

With a shrug of an apology, he continued: "I've already met this man. How is everything working." He may have looked like the man of my dreams, but was that not so strange? A total nightmare.

Unbelievable.

I sat in my chair, my fingers wrapped around the warm ceramic of my unbridled coffee. This wasn't how I thought we were supposed to be talking. Despite not giving it much thought, I didn't expect to be rejected before I could express my thoughts.

I exhaled slowly in an attempt to regulate the discomfort in my chest. At the time, I believed that I had discovered a valuable story to share, but was instead being dismissed as opportunistic like every other journalist. What happened?

And what made it worse? It all came across as an unobjectionable statement from him. He didn't make any offensive comments. I'm not being honest and assuming he was not trying to harm me. The reason I had my coffee was to save time. It was bitter. Fitting.

He resembled someone from my most fantasy-filled fantasies, with an effortless elegance that could easily be imagined as he emerged from the car seat in a romantic comedy. It was going to be one of the most vexing and disgraceful discussions I've ever had. It wasn't just his words. He delivered them in that manner. Unbothered. Certain. I sensed that he had already established my identity, preferences, and the reason for me being in his presence. The misinterpretation of facts was the one thing that I loathed.

I extended my arms and fixed his gaze. "You're used to assumptions, right?" He nodded off. It was a beautiful day. He shook his coffee cup once more, completely relaxed. "I call it experience." It was perfect timing.

With my eyebrow raised, I contemplated whether it was an experience or a display of modesty.

That got him. A hint of glee filled his face, then calmly schooled back into silence. ".

This may not have been as straightforward as I had assumed.""

Chapter 7: Fateh

Our page received a message from Nikhat, who is coming to visit.

During my regular morning routine, I observed the message being communicated to volunteers, who were reviewing the day's schedule, and making sure our current rescues were receiving enough attention. Initially, I skipped over it.' Another writer seeking to write about us..

I didn't like journalists.

In my experience, they were indifferent towards the cause. They arrived with their cameras and notepads, prepared to write a feel-good story about an honorable non-profit, but left without looking back. We were left unsupported by their narratives. The number of donations and adoptions did not rise significantly. However, their article, social media activity, and subsequent career goals were still in place. Why? I had ceased my involvement with them.

Despite my efforts, I was left feeling uneasy by this message.

Perhaps her words were the right one: No over-the-top slutch, no big promises of fame or prestige. A simple, genuine curiosity about our actions.

So, I agreed.

Standing by the entrance of the facility, I couldn't contain my excitement to meet her. It appeared to be waiting for her moment of truth to come out.

Then she walked in.

Initially, she appeared as if she were a regular customer, uncertain about where to go with her gaze and enjoying the

controlled environment. The whither of our rescues, the merging of volunteers in unison, disinfectant scent and damp fur. But then, something changed.

She didn't recognize me until after I saw her.

It wasn't intentional. I wasn't looking for her. Despite the noise, I observed her standing still.' Observing. She took in everything and spoke with her lips as if perceiving the reality of what she had experienced.

The facility was crossed by her eyes, and then she met me.

It was swift, lasting only one second. In that moment, I witnessed something that was beyond my expectations.

Recognition.

I didn't know her, but she looked at me like she was.? It appeared that I was familiar to her even before we had spoken.

I walked over there and when I spoke, her body was slightly troubled.

“Hi.

You're new.”.

As she blinked, she grasped her bag's strap tightly, her lips splitting as if she were in shock.

“Uh, yeah.

I'm Nikhat. I—”.

She shook her head, as if she wasn't sure about what to say or unless she read me before making a decision.

That was new. Most people, particularly journalists, were quick to jump into the introductions and try to convince me that they deserved my attention. But she seemed... careful.

I facilitated her with minimal difficulty."

I mean "You know, like when they messaged me saying they wanted to write something on us.

It was almost humorous how she felt relief..

"Yeah.

That's me."

I nodded off, focusing on her for the moment. She was—unexpected.

She was not shy but still.... Despite her lack of excitement, she wasn't afraid to do so either. Her confidence was not limited to speaking loudly. She carried herself with pride.

Interesting.

Looking at the clock, I muttered, "Coffee?"

It was not unexpected that she blinked and nodded.

"Oh.

Uh—sure."

I walked towards the door, anticipating her arrival. She paused for a moment before moving towards me and falling into place.

At first, I didn't have much interest in Nikhat. Second Leash would be unable to benefit from another article written by another journalist. I had a feeling that I would have shrugged off the message, but her words left me speechless. She didn't make an extravagant statement, not encircled by grand promises of increasing awareness or altering lives. Instead, it was straightforward and cautious, as if she had no desire to go beyond the norm.

Still, I had my doubts.

People would come and leave from the coffee shop that was just around the corner. Quiet, warm air, accompanied by the aroma of freshly baked goods and leisurely mornings.'

Upon being introduced to the barista, I quickly responded with a cappuccino and said it was for her.

She nodded in agreement, muttering that it was an uncertain decision. What if I had the desire for something else?

I chuckled. "You have the appearance of a cappuccino enthusiast."

Her laughter was small, but she refrained from arguing. We sat by the window, with the sun shining through the wooden table in between.

For a few moments, there was no sound.

After that, I reclined in my seat with loose hands around my cup. "Journalists are a source of great worry."

Moving slightly, she shrugged her shoulders expecting to be taken into her prepared speech.' I continued, my voice even, before she could move on.'"...

I know what you're saying, but I don't think you understand.' Scroll down for video.

A reporter enters the room, poses a few meaningful inquiries, presents eulogies on an honorable individual safeguarding vulnerable creatures, and is applauded for revealing information about the plight of wanderers. Donations and adoption rates don't see an increase, leaving us at the same point. You receive our phone number, but we don't.

With her head tilted slightly, she became aware of my tone. "I understand her perspective, but my decision to use the word carefully."

She nodded.

"Journalists don't help us.

They help themselves."

I noticed the initial irritation in her expression as her brows were crossed.

"I don't work like that."

With my index finger against the dining area, I said something. Our team has received visits from individuals who have shared their experiences, written about us, taken photos, posted updates, and what was the outcome? Nothing changes. Donations don't increase. Adoptions remain the same. Those who read, after a brief moment of goodwill, move on. Meanwhile, we're still here. Still struggling. Is still striving to preserve every life left abandoned, neglected, or discarded as irrelevant.

As if her next words were being evaluated, she opened and closed her mouth....?

"You're perfectly content with making assumptions," she says.

I remained still, leaning into my chair. "I call it experience."

It was my opinion that she would become defensive.' To assert that she was unique and that her article would have a positive impact.

Her eyebrow raised and asked if it was an expression of her humility or arrogance.

That was unexpected.

It was the first time since she sat down that I felt something other than doubtful.

Curiosity.

Nikhat was... different. Despite the pressure, she refrained from using overly formal expressions of her affection. She was just—there. Standing her ground and refusing to be rattled, listening.

Looking back, I breathed in air. This could be considered a time-saving measure.

I sat back in my chair, listening to the last remnants of our chat. With her expression unable to be deciphered, Nikhat had taken another sip of the cappuccino. Despite leaving the coffee shop feeling defeated, she maintained a composed and calculated demeanor. This was evident in her body language as well.

She had fought back. It's not a forceful action, not one filled with excessive intensity or rhetoric; it'll be controlled. With wit. With logic. The woman had not tried to persuade me of her identity and had instead declined to be classified as such.

And that... was interesting.

I glanced outside. As the sun rose earlier in the morning, it was visible through the windows and reflected off of the wooden floors of this café. The location had been bustling with activity, as the espresso machine hummed and conversations began to ring out. But the information did not come across as genuinely authentic.? I couldn't forget the girl who was standing in front of me.

Nikhat.

It was my expectation that she would follow in the footsteps of every other journalist who had entered Second Leash—

well-meaning yet ultimately pointless. I had hoped for polished script, a pre-planned plot, and the same unrequited enthusiasm I was tired of encountering. Rather than that, I was met with an alternative reality.

The fact that she was innocent wasn't entirely accurate. But beneath it, there was a sharp mind, quick reflexes and... an as-handed tongue.

She had already informed me that she was being arrogant to my face, which I wasn't expecting. It's surprising that she did it with such effortless confidence. "...

Most people wouldn't have pushed me like that. They would have either retreated or exerted too much effort to prove their worth.' But she had done neither. She had stood firm, measured her words, and played with the waters before I pushed back, as if to test her limits.

It was, I must say, a fun thing.'

Finally, she lowered her cup into my lap, exhaling softly before turning back towards me. Despite her lack of response, she maintained a gaze towards me, as if trying to downplay my actions. I was surprised by this.

It made me smirk.

"What?" I inquired, my eyes fixed on the ground.

A smile awaited on her lips as she shook her head. "There's nothing.". I'm struggling to determine if you are as difficult or not.

I exclaimed in a low voice, shaking my head. "You're still here." was the response I received. This implies that I'm not bad.

She gave a mild expression. "Maybe I'm just curious about trying something new.".

That caught me off guard.

It was not a matter of what she said, but rather her natural way of saying it, which made this exchange so effortless. A game. A challenge.

I widened my eyes, gazed at her, and for a moment felt like something changed.

Something I hadn't anticipated.

I had a tendency to forget most of the people I spoke with, particularly journalists. They came, conversed, and then departed. But this? This was like the start of something I couldn't quite name.

And that was... dangerous.

Nikhat was just another journalist who was on the lookout for a story. She wasn't there for me, no matter how different she looked or how funny she was. She attended the article.

Why did I suddenly start to question what she was going to say next? Was there a specific cause for me testing her like she was testing me? A.

I pushed the thought aside. This was nothing.

She was simply a random person in my vicinity.

Despite this, when she stood up and put her bag's strap on her shoulder to repair her hair in the sun, I was surprised by how closely I could watch her.

"You may be seen around here," she whispered, raising her head.

I nodded. "Guess so."

After a moment, she seemed to be distracted by something before shaking her head and heading towards the door. She continued to stay there. As she walked out, the sun shone

through her hair and the light breeze made contact with the fabric in her top pocket.

And just as that, she was no more.

I took my time, breathed deeply, and ran a hand through the hair before lifting my cup again.

Upon leaving, I should have disregarded her presence."

Something informed me that it wouldn't be happening anytime soon. I would only need to inform her of the necessity of Second Leash. Once again, I wanted to express my concerns.

Chapter 8: Nikhat

I left the café with my head down, but my thoughts were revolving in twelve directions. The morning was bright, the sun shining through the branches that were half-empty above me, and all I could do was listen to Fateh's words.

God, what a frustrating man.

Prior to my demonstration, he had dismissed me and classified me as every journalist who had ever entered his life. He was unapologetic, haughty, and confident in his assumptions. Yet, there was a deeper aspect to the matter. Something that caused me to contemplate leaving completely. Almost. Something that made me want to stay.

Not only was he angry at journalists, but his exhaustion was also evident. Frustrated. Maybe even a little hopeless. The way he wrapped his coffee cup tightly with fingers and had an awkward jaw while discussing Second Leash's lack of support. The intensity of his feelings was accompanied by heavier baggage.

It had a strikingly similar appearance to the fearful. And that intrigued me.

Upon entering the café, I was anticipating meeting another person who had a firm and confident demeanor and possessed control over everything. It turned out to be something that was being worked hard to avoid falling into the ground. The fact that people like that would eventually break down was something I knew for sure.

Within a few days, I began researching.

Fateh himself, not just Second Leash.'

What I came across simply corroborated my beliefs.

It was almost two years ago, while still in college, that he started the nonprofit. He had nothing but a handful of dogs that were rescued and some volunteers. In the initial year, there was a lot of optimism as he received media coverage, donations, and sponsorships. The momentum had dwindled over time.' Second Leash had become a minor force in the news cycle, overshadowed by bigger and more dramatic reasons.

The donations had dwindled. The adoptions had stagnated. And now? The door was left unopened by them.

Then I found myself glued to my laptop for hours, checking out old papers, reading excerpts from interviews with Fateh about Second Leash. However, the man I had encountered in cafe couldn't be forgotten.

That wasn't just conviction. That was desperation.

On the following Saturday, I arrived at Second Leash without any clue about why. It could be due to curiosity or stubbornness.'

Maybe it was because I couldn't hear his voice fully, even though he had mentioned that nothing ever changed. Or maybe not.

I remember the facility exactly as it was—strange, chaotic, but filled with this untamed energy. Volunteers were silently moving around, taking care of the dogs, cleaning out kennels, and preparing food.

Fateh conversed with a volunteer while standing near the entrance. From afar, I could feel the strain in his shoulders, the way his fingers scraped at his temple like he was vomiting from ear to enlarge his headache.

He raised his eyebrow at the sight he had just caught and then said nothing.

With a hand raised, I responded: "Wouldn't you have scared me off before?"

Breathing, and ran a hand through his hair. He replied: 'Most people have better things to do than follow up on mummy I. want you not tell me...

"I drew my arms closer, wondering who might have been curious about something."

That made him pause. His gaze reverberated across me, leaving me tormented by uncertainty and intrigue.

I reacted by exclaiming, opting to be truthful. "I'm not coming here to take advantage of your nonprofit.". The reason I am here is that I believe you are incorrect....

As if to invite me to continue, he lifted his head slightly.

He was my watchful eye. "The truth is that journalism doesn't serve any purpose.". Awareness isn't useless. The task at hand demands precise execution..

He laughed briefly and shook his head. "Do you think I'm the right person to do it?"

I chuckled, hisses, "Maybe it isn't."

"I understand that your actions are not the only reason, but they also serve you." His expression softened, yet there was something else in his eyes. Something like hesitation. At that point, I realized that I had hit a roadblock.

Over the next few days, I was consistently present. Through my observation, I gained knowledge through listening.

Second Leash's survival was a laborious process, with employees working long hours, indebted to their employers,

and facing constant worry about funding. Fateh's exhaustion was visible in the way he carried weight on his shoulders, concealed by sharp words and a carefully controlled demeanor.

Is there something that really hit home for me? What was it? I witnessed his immense love. He was not exclusively managing a nonprofit. He was fighting for it. He was determined to pretend otherwise, but his actions were ineffective.

During late afternoon, I found him sitting outside the hospital looking out at an empty street. For once, he looked... tired. Really tired. Defeated even.

I waited for a moment before taking my seat beside him. We were both silent for a moment before speaking out. Afterward, I softly inquired: "How severe is this?".

Exhaled and put his hand across his face. 'Bad.

I surveyed him. "Most likely... shutting down was bad?".

The man's jaw clenched and he nodded in agreement, "If things don't change soon."

My response was to not speak, he had just taken it easy. He had never confessed to it before. For the first time he defied his guard. In a sense, that was the most important thing.

Eventually, I expressed that my intention was not to write about Second Leash solely for the sake of something worthwhile.

He lowered his head and gazed at me. "And what if it's not helpful?".

I observed him closely. "At least I gave a go."

For the first time, his expression became softer.

Furthermore, the boundaries between us became indistinct.

Our role as a journalist and hesitant interviewee had diminished. Why?

Our shared goal was to rescue each other and preserve what mattered. It's conceivable that we were not entirely different.

I didn't know when it was changing.

Perhaps the reason was either rubbing his temples, feeling tired and having those beautiful brown eyes fill up, or discovering that someone was barely holding onto her confident aura. His reluctant acceptance of the fact that Second Leash was struggling and he felt more pressured than anyone else did when pressed for assistance. My only realization was that something had changed. The reason I was present was no longer just to write a story. His significance made me feel at home. Because this mattered.

Fateh had not provided much information on that night. He had just reacted by exhaling, slow and furiously, as if the words had been overwhelming him. As if by finally acknowledging his invincibility. ".

Standing by his side, I remained silent while watching the way his shoulders had relaxed after finally opening up to someone who could see beyond his walls.

It was as if nothing had occurred the next morning.

Fateh's fear of me has become evident in his current state.

Although he was not as dismissive when we first met, people were less likely to acknowledge his presence. He never spoke for more than a few minutes with me, but there was something about his gaze that made him change his mind. Why?

It seemed he was aware that I wasn't being taken lightly by the calm exterior. I knew, he was aware. And maybe that

unsettled him. I could have gotten away with it. It's possible that I should have stayed put, followed the article, and left it as such.

The issue was, I had never been able to let things go. What happened?

The act of letting good people down was something I loathed.

I was observing a group of dogs playing together on the ground next to one of the fenced play areas as the sky shone orange, and it was late in the afternoon. The small, unkempt dog with odd ears had developed a fondness for my shoelaces, persistently tugging at them as if they were his new treasure.

I whispered, "Are those not chew toys?" and pushed him with my knee. He replied.

Then, he yanked and tugged even harder.

I sighed. "Alright, fine. You win."

I gazed up without any laughter. Until then.

Fateh looked on with a humorous expression, his hands in his pockets, standing ten feet away from the scene. He was covered in sunlight, making the soft brown waves shimmer almost gold. ". His effortless appearance was reminiscent of a high-octane commercial.

It was infuriating.

"What?" I inquired, my eyes fixed on the ground.

With a slight frown, he nodded in agreement with the small menace still gripping my shoelaces. "You've just formed... an old friend."

It felt like a captor to me. I tried to help the dog but it didn't shake off. "You could probably assist," she said.

His face was grimace. "It seems like you're in control."

I focused on him. "Tell me once more why I chose to collaborate with you?" He replied.

Then his smile grew. "Because you're an unyielding boy."

With relief, I managed to break free from the puppy's grasp.... He promptly slithered onto his back in protest, with his small legs flopping high in the air. My jaw dropped, I reached out to scratch his stomach.

While watching, Fateh sat down facing me and stretched his legs out.

The activity was distinct and unique.

He seemed to be letting his guard down, just a little.'

I looked at him. "Are you experiencing a headache?"

It was unexpected that his eyebrow had widened slightly upon receiving the inquiry. "Alright." He replied.

"You get them often?"

He hesitated, then exhaled. "Lately? Yeah."

I nodded and simulated my thoughts of the puppy. "You should take breaks, folks.". That's something people do.

He chuckled briefly, but there was no real sense of humour. "Saunders don't hold onto Second Leash."

"Neither does burnout."

He didn't respond to that.

The sole noises were the distant dog barking and the gentle wind chill through the trees, for a brief moment.

He quietly stated, "I cannot afford to stop."?

I looked up.

I didn't see him, but he was staring at the fence with his fingers scanning patterns on the ground. He wasn'?

I positioned my hands to gaze at him. "What led you to initiate this activity?"

He breathed deeply, as if contemplating his words. "It's because nobody else will.";

I awaited, permitting him to proceed.'

But then, in a split second, he did it.

"Throughout my youth, there were strays that permeated my surroundings," he admitted, his voice becoming quieter. He expressed his discomfort with being sick, injured, or starving.

Individuals would pass them off as inconsequential entities and disregard them.' I hated it. My youth made me feel like I couldn't accomplish anything. Whenever the chance presented itself, I committed to doing something.

He gazed at me, his dark eyes incomprehensible. "That's the intended purpose of the Second Leash."...

I swallowed, unprepared for the rawness of his voice.'".

His concern for the task at hand was evident, as it reflected in his work methods and the frustration that came with hearing about the lack of progress. But this?

This was different.

This was personal.

He looked away, exhaling sharply. 'It feels like I'm failing too much.

My chest tightened.

It was a familiar sensation for me.

"You're not," I said firmly.

He gave a brief, bitter expression. "Simply state that into the bank account."

And you don't just have to pay for something."

He sarcastically declined to mention. "Don't attempt to run a nonprofit without it."

Holding a hand against my scalp, I sighed. "Alright, you're in trouble." How should I handle the situation? Nevertheless, this doesn't eliminate all the things you have done. It doesn't mean you've failed."

The ground caught his gaze as he didn't respond. He just stared.

I paused to consider whether I had been pushing too hard.'

I was so quiet, almost without sound, when he said that it didn't feel adequate.

And suddenly, I understood.

There were other factors besides the money.

It centered on the responsibility, stress, and intense anxiety of being unable to defend your self-made creation.'

"I breathed deeply, leaning forward." But I realized he wasn't the only one.

His jaw sunk. "Who is the next person to come out?"

I softly replied, "I'm not knowledgeable, but maybe it's time to let people assist."

He flicked his eyes to mine, and something unreadable was passing through them.

I held my breath.

He nodded after what felt like an eternity."..."

I was unable to see it because of the subtlety, but my eyes could have seen it.

But it was a start.

That was sufficient for the time being.

I walked away from Second Leash that evening with a spinning head.

Fateh was... complicated.

Quietly fighting and sharp edges wrapped up in a package that was so frustrating it almost took over from his sole purpose in being human.... The act of a man carrying something that is not falling to his death's depths.

I came across something for the first time after meeting him....

There were other aspects beyond the article at present. There were other reasons for this, not just to discredit him.

This was about him.

His voice sounded off as soon as he mentioned Second Leash. The exhaustion he attempted to conceal was the reason.? He carried everything by himself because he didn't trust anyone else to do it correctly.

Without warning, I didn't merely desire to lend a hand.

I needed to.

Although he was unaware of the fact at that time.

Chapter 9: Fateh

I wasn't used to this.
To someone sticking around.

Claiming to care was a preferred behavior among people. After spending a week or two in the vicinity, they inquired about the situation, eventually joined into the conflict, and then vanished when it became too overwhelming. It was a continuous pattern.'

My expectations had shifted.

But Nikhat?

She didn't leave.

In the beginning, I believed it was due to the article. She was determined to keep up her work, unwilling to let it go at any cost. However, as time went on, I began to notice something else. She didn't simply come here to write. Her intention was to be. She had deemed Second Leash, and consequently, my miserable existence, as worth the sacrifice. For some strange reason.?

It started small.

She would come by with chai and some absurd insights about the world, such as why people who dislike chidoodles should be banished and why socks should always match.).'. I initially found it slightly irritating.' Afterward, I started to anticipate it.

She'd check in. I am not the only one affected by it, as neither the dogs nor the volunteers.

Her question, with arms crossed and brow furrowed, was "Are you still having something to do?".

As I rolled my eyes, I replied: "Not five-years-old!" and then I found myself sitting across from her, eating the food she had made in an all-out frenzy about something ridiculous like how dogs must have British accents when they think of me." Then we talked.

During one evening, she discovered me sitting in the back office, with my head down, and unpaid bills in hand.

Initially, I wasn't aware of her presence. She only did this after dropping something on the desk in front of me.

Her statement was that "choose is for stress.".

"I shook my head in despair. You have to give me chocolate, Nikhat.".

She gave a shrug and declined. "No, but it'll keep you from getting out of here for the next five minutes.".

Despite my sighing, I picked up the chocolate. Why? Her expression was more gentle than usual as she watched me release it. I detested the fact that she could see through my presence with such ease.'

"Send me a message," she whispered, then briefly. "Leave me some information.".

I should have deflected. My words were dismissive. My own rule was challenged by the way she looked at me, as if she was truly interested in knowing what I had to say instead of just wanting to write about something dramatic.

I couldn't stop thinking about it, "I'm failing.".

The reaction of Nikhat was not what I anticipated.. There was no effort to argue with her and she didn't acknowledge my absurdity. Bringing down a chair, placing her elbow on

the desk, and waiting. As if she had an endless amount of time.'

So I told her.

I shared with her the financial crisis, lack of donations, and feeling like a perpetual backlog. For the first time since I started using Second Leash, I was truly concerned about its survival....

And she listened. Really listened.

Afterward, in the usual Nikhat fashion, she simply stated "Okay."

I frowned. "Okay?"

She nodded. "We fix it."

I chuckled. "You mean, it's easy."

That's something I say with certainty.

The way she spoke made it seem like a reality show. Recovery wasn't instant. It was not a dramatic movie scene where one good thing happened and everything went smoothly. It was slow. It was frustrating. It was exhausting.

Even so, she remained.'

Her assistance in sorting through finances included concepts that I had not considered before. She coerced me into attending networking events, making me engage in conversations with individuals who had the ability to provide assistance. Her actions involved inphongng contacts, initiating additional social media campaigns, pulling out all possible avenues.

I observed and eventually came to the realization that I was not alone in this endeavor.

I had never leaned into anyone before. The risk involved taking risks. The moment I depended on someone, they would leave, and I would be worse off than before.

But Nikhat? She was proving me wrong.

Following an extended period, I stumbled upon her outside the shelter with her eyes closed and her back against the wall. I hesitated before stepping closer.

"You planning on sleeping there?"

She opened one of her eyes. "Turing."

While I was sitting with her, she placed her head on my shoulder. I felt like I consciously set aside time for her to do that. Both of us remained silent for an hour. It seemed like the world was still, the air full of a faint rainy earthly fragrance.'

She paused to catch her breath. "As someone who constantly refers to me as a headache, I'm already feeling exhausted."

I chuckled. "You're still present.". That's on you."

She lowered her head and gazed at me, then really looked at my reflection. Something sparked in her eyes was something I couldn't quite describe. "Yes, sure." She whispered back softly.

And at that point, I had a realization.

There was more than one person who had stumbled upon me, Nikhat. Second Leash was not just a journalist or aide who helped me save it. She also played incredibly important. She was my constant. The individual who had arrived, stayed, and stood by me without any issues.' I remained silent. My readiness to do it was in doubt.' But I knew it. And that was enough.

Although not a miracle fix, the improvements at Second Leash were better. Lighter. It's possible that I was just as bad, maybe even slightly. Nikhat persisted in coming, and for the record, I didn't bother to ask why.

We entered into an unspoken pattern—mornings spent in the ward, afternoons working on logistics for her team, and evenings full of denial from her about not having time to rest me. There were days when she would take me out for coffee, and there were other occasions when we had to watch some strange movie that she deemed necessary.

Through it all, I gained unexpected trust in her. I was never informed about anything that occurred to her. What happened? Not really.

Despite the slightest deviation, I observed that she occasionally gazed at her phone and sighed, and her energy fluctuated upon receiving specific calls. Her disappearance for a day or two was followed by her return with greater distance. I didn't push. I had no right to.

A time when she was more quiet than usual, her phone gripped at her and I asked if she felt okay.

Without any indication, she blinked. Afterward, she smiled after a brief beat. "Yeah.". Just college stuff."

"I asked, "What about college?" I raised my head.

She chuckled broadly. "You know, deadlines, assignments... those of us at the top who think their class is the only thing that matters."

It was a lie. She didn't seem to be in my sight, and her voice was erratic. But I let it go.

There is a chance that certain matters should have been resolved at earliest.

Chapter 10: Nikhat

It started over something small. It always did. It was a missed call, an accidental error, 'an act of stupidity that in some ways turned into something much bigger. It was all about having a meal or not having dinner this time.'...

The little mom-and-pop café on the corner at the campus food court was where we agreed to meet that evening. He had a great time! I had guaranteed to be there by the time I turned seven. I was buried in my notes for a group project, with headphones on, and unaware of the time until seven. What happened?

My phone was already inundated with three missed calls and a series of texts when I checked it.

"Hey, where are you?"

"Still waiting."

"Seriously?"

Did you forget again?"

I felt like throwing my buttocks during the last one. He had already mentioned, "You shouldn't care about how little you care." How strange that he didn't say anything new? I called him back with my phone. He didn't answer.

I began to speak in a casual tone, but my voice became raspy. "I'm sorry deeply."

I lost track of time—"

I know you did too,' he blurted out, 'That's true, Nikhat.

Always an excuse."

My expression faded, my anger reverberating. "I'm not giving any explanation." I said I'm sorry—".

He cut me off again, his voice becoming louder. "You're always apologizing." I'm still not sure what went wrong.

But nothing ever changes. You claim to care, but I'm always present and waiting for your response. Why?

His words were more jarring than I anticipated. "It's unfair," I said, gesturing through my small dorm room. "I feel like I've been busy all week!". I know how much you suck at this project,".

"He acknowledged that he had also experienced stress. Nevertheless, I still make time for you."

Despite my intentions, I still make it. Do you realize the emotions of being always waiting? Are you even aware of them? The one who's trying?".

I stumbled, gripping the edge of my desk with both feet. "Do you think it's just me?". Are you indifferent towards me? Request.

He said, "I'm not sure it feels like that," he mentioned, his voice becoming less quiet now, but still no less restrained. "You're always preoccupied."

Always distracted. I am always advised to accept that you are not the most important thing in your life.

My voice and temper grew together as I responded. "What the heck? What's going on?". You're saying that I don't deserve you? Do you think I am at fault for this?

"That's not what I'm saying!" he snapped, running out of patience. "I'm saying I'm tired, Nikhat."

The thought of working so hard while you coast is exhausting me. It seems as if I am the only one who truly cares about making this happen.

The words came out before I could stop them, and I stooped my head. "I have reason to believe you got it right.". Maybe you do care more. I think you're doing better than me in this.

I guess maybe I am," he said, and his voice was bitter as though it had been slapped.

We were both speechless, and everything we had just spoken shook us like a wall that neither of us could climb. I aimed to convey my intentions by saying something, rectifying the situation, and convincing him of my genuine concern and personal endeavors. But the words wouldn't come.

His voice was filled with frustration as he finally said, "Look, I need to think about this."

It's time for me to determine if this is still worth the investment.

The knot in my throat grew tighter, but I was able to speak up. "Finally.". Give yourself the time you require.

He stopped, as if waiting for me to speak further. When I didn't, he gave me a powerful cry of relief. "Please take care, Nikhat."

Following that, he ended his communication.'

My dorm room was filled with silence as I stared at the screen for a long time. This wasn't just a fight. The solution was not a quick apology or an assurance to improve the situation. It felt like the beginning of a larger and heavier world.'

About ten days after our last fight, we had a disjointed and unfeeling exchange that was deeply personal. I thought we'd gotten over it, but then again, I don't know whether I actually believed I had. The phone call made during dinner demonstrated otherwise.

I was astonished to find the name on my screen. After looking at it, I mused about whether to respond.

My voice was hesitant, and I had to say hello because I wasn't ready for something. What would you say?

He whispered, "Can I have a conversation?" More nervously than I ever used to be.

Despite my hesitation, I held onto the edge of our dining area as if to keep myself steady. "I'm currently having dinner.". Can I call you back?"

After a brief break, I heard him take ill and felt hurt by the way he said it. He finally replied, "OK."

I stated that I would call them back, hoping to sound more firmly and controlled.

He stated that it was "correct," but the line stopped working.

As I lay back, the knot in my stomach began to feel tighter. I could hear his voice, but it was still a bit resignation-like. I felt like I was standing at the edge of something that would always be there, just like a door closing slowly and knowing it wasn't going to arrive on time.

It took me twenty minutes to call him back.

My voice was strained, but I spoke softly: "What are you up to?"

"This is no longer effective," he declared, without any preamble or softness.

That was just plain truth, hitting you in the chest.

My breath became pierced. "What does this mean?"

"We're in the wrong place," he stated, his voice heavy with anger. "This is unacceptable behavior."

I keep trying, Nikhat. It seems like we're stuck in a constant state of trying to fix things and find ourselves back on track.

If I believe we have reached our destination, we always return to the starting line.

"We seemed fine, I'd say," my voice sounded almost whispered.

You think we're doing well, that's the thing."

Do you not have that kind of perception? How we keep chipping away at each other? The idea of being in a relationship where we are barely holding on and pretending to be happy when it isn't is not appealing.

"With words that wouldn't stop, we can resolve the issue," I said. "Let us just talk."

We can figure it out."

I was tired of talking, my voice sounded like hell. "I've been trying hard." What did he mean.

But I'm tired, Nikhat. The constant pressure of fixing things is exhausting me.

"So what?"

"Are you giving up?" I inquired, my voice becoming angry and desperation trailing behind.

With a raspy voice, he stated: "I'm not giving up yet. But I can't continue." Incredibly.

Feeling this way is beyond my capabilities.

My throat was tight after swallowing hard. What's the significance of this statement?

He stated that he needed time to process the situation.

My thoughts raced towards the wall, with no discernible reason to allow him to remain. "I'll wait," I said, sounding like shattered glass.

There was a prolonged silence from him. Upon speaking, his voice became more low. "Nikit, take care of yourself."

Afterward, the line stopped functioning.

Sitting in silence, I felt the weight of what he had said on me. This wasn't just a fight. A few apologies and promises of improvement weren't enough to resolve the issue. It was a larger size, the beginning of the end.'

Five days passed.

I reflected on the conversation, silence, and sudden shift in our surroundings. It was like they were talking to each other for hours on end. The experience was akin to being in limbo in the same room, where the air became heavier with each passing minute, spending hours in agony. While I wasn't inclined to push, my thoughts were racing: What if?

The silence was broken by the pinging of a text one evening. I had a hard time reading the phone, my heart racing. Why did I feel this way? The screen flickered for a second, and with that brief hesitation, I felt like it was falling away, even though I had lost all hope.

"Agreed, I believe I've deliberated."

I am not interested in doing this anymore.'

The words were unambiguous, almost like a sentence. After reading them anew, I expected to find some of the same meaning. Looking in circles, the more I observed, there was

no mistaking. This was not something that could be resolved through a conversation or reorientation. It was over. It shook me all the time, and I felt my air in my chest compressing. I strived to maintain that this was just another chapter ending, and it was a natural part of life. Still, that wasn't the case. The experience was like the door was being slammed shut in the most disturbing and strenuous way.

I sat in the dark, watching the message as if it were about to change, and wanted it to be different.' Despite my fixation on the words, I was unable to make any changes and stared at the screen with certainty. I wanted to respond. Asking for clarification, wondering if there was anything that could still be preserved. I came to the realization that there was no use for it as I contemplated it.

I pressed the button on my phone slowly, almost with reverence, as if the screen could provide me with some sort of answer. Yet, there was simply no more besides the peaceful murmurs of the world's expanse, the tickling motion every second, unaware of my silent devastation. I longed to get in touch, but the only option left was sitting still and trying to make sense of everything that had recently passed through my mind.

I don't regret saying yes to him in retrospect.' For a. The walks under the sun and the moments when I thought we might make it all work are not regrettable. However, I am confident that I don't regret leaving. Discovering the beauty in knowing when to let go and choosing yourself over someone who can't do it is a rare beauty. As I stood on the other side of the story, I recognized that this was just the beginning of my journey towards self-discovery.

Ultimately, it wasn't a dramatic fight or sweeping revelation that brought things to an end. A solitary, nonverbal communication.' The knowledge that our

destination was nowhere. A newfound calmness enveloped me when I woke up one morning. After months of doubting my own thinking, I wasn't. I had a clear idea of what to do.

In retrospect, I don't regret saying "yes" to him. How could I? At a certain moment, I was in love with him and he was the ideal partner for my life. You may not always be able to envision the outcome of love in your life. There are moments when the person who feels like your life partner is only meant to be a part of your journey and serve as initiation into your chosen profession. I recognized that it was necessary to release him, even though it hurt.

His teachings included the idea of following one's instincts and listening to their intuition. I had been captivated by the notion of being us and what we could become if we put in enough effort for a while.

Don't let love make you feel like you're not up to the task or have any real skills.

It's not all bad, it'll be natural. I'll always cherish the moments I spent with him, including the late-night walks across campus, his humor during exams, and our time together in the library. The memories are still stored in a corner of my mind, indicative of softer times. They were simpler days.

However, the cracks started to appear gradually over time. Uncommon misconceptions grew into conflicts, unfulfilled desires that neither of us could fulfill, and the bitterness which gradually settled. We both made an effort, but sometimes hard work just doesn't cut it. Despite their mutual love, sometimes two people aren't meant to be together.

That offers a unique sense of tranquility when one accepts it. To acknowledge that releasing something that's not

functioning properly, even in the face of discomfort. To force something that no longer aligns with your desires and holding on only makes the pain worse. Why? It took me a while to realize that my decision to leave was not an admission of failure, but rather remorse and centered on personal growth. I finally understood this.

Our time together was brief, but it was a chapter in my life that I had to chronicle. My initial genuine connection, my first love, and I will always cherish him dearly.. He taught me about vulnerability and the importance of showing concern for others' well-being even when faced with adversity. He demonstrated to me the experience of caring about another person and wanting to create something meaningful with them.

Even so, he revealed what I'm not willing to accept. My wish is to avoid a kind of unresolved love, where I must find icebergs between my own desires and those of others. It seems unlikely that I want to be in a relationship where I have to compromise my own desires and self-worth. What can I do?

I desire a love that is both free and capable of happening. Love that pushes me to be the best I can be, embracing my failures and flaunting my accomplishment."". An affectionate bond that feels like a true friendship, at least to me.

As I gazed at the empty walls of my dorm room, I felt a profound sense of loss while sitting there that night. But there was another sigh of affirmation in me. The act of letting him go made way for something more fulfilling. My choices were limited, and I was deciding on my own happiness and future self-image.

I don't want to say it was easy. The following days were some of the most challenging I've ever experienced. Whenever I saw couples walking hand in hand across

campus, I would hear a song that reminded me of him or find an old photo on my phone and it would feel like the wound was being re-laid upon. But healing isn't linear. The process is time-consuming, requiring some level of preparation and patience to navigate the chaos.

Eventually, I found myself again through self-discovery. My focus was on studying, joining new clubs, spending more time with friends. I began writing again, taking my thoughts and feelings into the page to try and understand everything that was happening around me. Gradually, I began to reestablish my identity and goals in a more solid, informed way.

I closed the door on that chapter, ready to proceed. Hence, Looking for the love that wasn't a burden but an encouragement. What would you say? This is love at its core.

It's not likely to happen overnight, I'm aware. There will be times when I feel uncertain and doubts arise, causing the pain of what I've lost to come back. My faith in my ability to persevere and pursue the life I aim to construct is strong.

In the final analysis, love isn't about finding someone who completes you. The objective is to find a companion who adds value to your personality, showcases your strengths, and walks with you as an equal.' It is my conviction that that type of love awaits me.

In the interim, I don't mind if I'm alone. I can concentrate on my personal growth and focus on achieving my desired persona. I've learned that I deserve a love that feels authentic, natural, and effortless. A love that doesn't make me question my worth but keeps reminiscing to me every day.

I'll be prepared when that love arrives.

Chapter 11: Nikhat

The beginning of the semester was marked by hustle and disorder, with students holding onto their last pieces of holiday nostalgia and reluctantly returning to campus life. This time, there was a distinct change in the atmosphere.' Maybe the reason was its nearness to Valentine's Day, but love dominated everyone'. Eighteen-year olds, brimming with hormones and consumed by rom-com indulgences wanted their plus-ones. Why?

It wasn't unusual to hear people talking about each other. "Who's your boyfriend?" It was a constant conversation that could be heard in the hallways and cafeteria lines. Without any response, strategies, or notions of what to do. Malay, who I would rely on, asked me the question that had a significant impact until one afternoon. This was it.

"Why haven't you found a partner yet?"

I shrugged, unimpressed initially. "I can't believe it was me, but then I felt numb, which was uncommon for him.". I had no comment to make.'

He emphasized the importance of doing it, speaking in the same tone that he always used when acknowledging his own intelligence. "You are good enough."

Cute even. Someone might actually like you."

His words stuck in my head even after I had just laughed. Later that night, I was contemplating it.. Is it possible for me to have a personal relationship with someone? Was I even ready? I looked through all my photos on my phone from home. An unreserved and persistent figure emerged.

My favourite headache.

Our relationship had grown into something more than just friendship. He had a pleasant demeanor with slick eyes, making him appealing to everyone. Nevertheless, he made me feel at ease. I didn't have to be someone else.

The next time I came across Malay, I informed him. "I believe I've found it."

"Who?"

I exhibited a snapshot of us together. "Him."

With just a slight glance, he exclaimed "I thought about it as much.". My thoughts are truly centered on the prospect of you getting married.

"Stop it Malay!"

The moment I reached campus, everything was transformed. It felt completely different.". Love-coded, as some people would say. The universe was hinting at me, giving way to unpredictable hints. When I put down my bags, his name appeared on the screen, almost like he was aware of what I was going through. "I've reached," I said softly.

Seeing you, I left Fateh after only 6 hours had already passed.

I was able to infuse myself with a hug that was all-encompassing and full of love, resembling the bond we shared after years of being apart.

It was... nice.

Nevertheless, there was an odd weight floating in the air, a stillness that I couldn't quite put into words. It wasn't the usual nervousness that accompanied the start of a new semester, but this one was more manageable. Something inside me seemed to have changed.". It wasn't just a past

relationship that was taking over my life. This was not a feeling of hollowness caused by heartbreak, but rather emptiness that I had no idea I needed to fill.

Occasionally, as the sun set and the orangish-pink sky formed into hills, I contemplated it when the world outside my window felt quiet. The stillness was almost too much to bear, but not due to loneliness. The sound of silence filling you up when you're alone for an extended period, leaving only your thoughts behind.

I had dinner with Fateh later that evening. Our kinda dinner. My intention was to make fun of him by suggesting a dinner date at some point.

"I'm not happy about this," I said softly.

"I made an effort to prevent you," he stated.

With my phone in hand, I snapped a picture of us and was always on the go. I have a great passion for documenting my peers, remembering fleeting moments to revisit them and smile. "

"Walk?" he suggested after dinner.

"I'm experiencing freezing temperatures, so I resorted to rubbing my hands for warmth."

With a smile that conveys confidence, he moved over to my warm slippers. It was incredibly nice.'

During both that night and the subsequent days, we spent hours walking and talking. Throughout my entire journey, Fateh had been there to provide for me. After the turmoil and distress of the previous semester, he was my anchor and helped me find some stability. I was oblivious to the fact that I had such strong feelings for him in the days following our breakup. I didn't actively seek his company, but whenever I needed someone, Fateh came to the rescue. He possessed the

ability to support me without being too overwhelming, always keeping in mind that he was there for me when I struggled or fell.

After a week or so, I recall one evening. My phone rang with a text from Fateh, just as I was curled up in bed with the world on my mind. What an emotional impact!

“You good?”.

Despite the simplicity of the message, it still resonated with me, as if they had assured me that I was not alone. "I responded with a brief "Yeah," but I wasn't entirely convinced. I was uncertain about my needs and whether there was any need for me....

Fateh misunderstood my simple answer. His mesmerizing eyes, swollen from the tears they spilled over my face and his quiet demeanor made it easier for myself to sleep. He probably spent most of the night there.' The.

The breakup was a slow and painful process.'... But I was busy with work and assignments and hanging out with the few friends I had.

Malay kept teasing me about how 'distracted' I seemed, and I didn't have the energy to pretend I wasn't. It wasn't that I was hung up on my ex, but more that I was still figuring out who I was without him. And I wasn't sure how to do that.

During the course of the semester, I was absent for 24 hours. My day was unplanned."'. I didn't have any pressing needs or urgent plans, and I was not prepared to do anything about them. Spending time with xyz(ex) was once normal, but now it felt almost foreign. It was so different. Fateh was the destination of my spontaneous decision. Despite being situated just down the road from campus, Second Leash was too far away for me to skip over and visit.

I didn't call him beforehand. My intention was to keep him unaware of my arrival and avoid making him think he had to have fun. It's the kind of unexpected thing that felt right, even though I hadn't done it in a while.

Walking into the shelter later that afternoon, it felt as though I was entering a protected area. It was calm. It was familiar. For the first time in weeks, I felt a true smile tugging at the corners of my lips. After a warm embrace from Fateh, I quickly fell into his arms, feeling more alive and content than ever before. It completely transformed my entire being.

Fateh and I were not even close to each other for the entirety of our lives. We had a separate world to explore, separate from my college, his work, our relationship, and any drama. The entire world was committed to staying the same, regardless of any changes.'

There was no discussion of something heavy. It wasn't about the breakup. It wasn't about his work. I didn't feel a sense of space. It was just us, laughing and making jokes before falling into a comfortable silence. This is the reason why I have such a deep fondness for him. The moment we spent together was completely self-aware, as if our time had been wasted. The afternoon was dedicated to being...

As we always did, we walked around the corner. Despite my attempts to humorize him by making fun of his senseless direction, the other person looked annoyed at me for having made unnecessary comments. We ended up sitting outside in the small courtyard, discussing everything and nothing for hours. This was the kind of day where you didn't realize it until your departure time.

I was escorted back to my campus by Fateh when it was time to leave. It didn't matter how tired he got, if it was even

slightly late. I could tell that he had the answer to walk me back, which was unambiguous and straightforward.

We stood outside the main entrance and he said, "We're going to be fine."".

Looking at him, I was left perplexed. "What's your name?".

"I mean, you've got this.

Despite smiling, his light brown eyes looked like hazel under the sun, and I couldn't believe how strong they were. "Nikhat, you're going to be fine.".

I was unsure if I believed him at the time, but his words provided me with some encouragement. It was the first time in a long time that I felt unoccupied and not completely rested. It was as if I was losing myself to Fateh."". Almost forever, incompetently and ruthlessly.

Our unwritten way of ending our day was the same. I'd give a high five, raise my palms, and he'll touch mine with his own, then let his fingers slip behind them for ten seconds before touching mine again. After that, without any hesitation, he would embrace me in a hug that was warm and all-encompassing, making me feel secure and safe.

For the next few months, Fateh remained my closest friend.' It was as if I had recognized that I relied on him for my emotional support, but I didn't want to admit it. He had a unique connection with me that made it seem like we were more than just friends, and sometimes they felt too close to each other. He knew exactly when I was upset, without me saying anything. At which point did he need to interrupt me? With the ability to recognize when I needed privacy, he elevated me above just being a friend."

Pratyush started to clarify things in ways I wasn't anticipating.. I was introduced to his intuition and he once

asked me about my reaction during our chai walk, "When do you think we can confess this?"

"What the hell am I supposed to believe?" I asked in an attempt to be unintelligent.

Fateh has a deep love for you.

You don't see it?"

I froze. "What are you up to?"

His eyes glazed over with exasperation. "You're the only one on this planet who doesn't realize how much he loves you."

"I muttered, wondering if I was telling the truth."

Pratyush firmly stated that "He's not anymore."

I was unsure of what to make of it. It didn't make sense. Could it be said that Fateh was my most trusted friend? Always had been. He wasn't something I expected to be. Deep inside, I had a vague question about Pratyush's accuracy.

The semester was winding down, and with my graduation just around the corner. I wasn't afraid anymore. Not in terms of isolation, not regarding the process or outcome of losing my true self. I was grateful for the fact that I wasn't alone anymore. I had Fateh, and he was my constant companion.

Yes, I pinky promised him. We had become an unspoken duo, and our relationship was gradually gaining more significance than we were willing to acknowledge.

Maybe I was just starting to notice it. The. Discovering the characteristics of being in a relationship with Fateh. And the kind of person I wanted to be.

There was one thing I feared the most when it came time to leave Fateh and start living the next chapter in my life. It didn't strike me as a suitable subject. Maybe I wasn't ready yet.

Chapter 12: Fateh

Time is a fleeting phenomenon that occurs unexpectedly. Why?

It was evident to me that Nikhat was about to depart. She had never been immune to the presence of it in conversations, packing, and sighing when discussing the logistics of moving to Dubai. This was evident throughout. Even though it hadn't impacted me, I wasn't. shhh...

Knowing that she wouldn't be here anytime soon, I had no choice but to watch the days unfold. That soon, she'd be gone.

I was unable to articulate it adequately. I consistently encountered fragments of my thoughts, which were not coherent. 'Beautiful. Breathtaking. I was unable to compose a sentence for her, woe behemmed.' How do I even begin?

I become incapable of thinking. I feel like I'm experiencing a mental breakdown from the moment she comes up, leaving me with an overwhelming amount of emotions.

My intention was to be with her. All day. All night. It felt unnatural to say it out loud, as I was attempting to hold on to something too liberating or fantastical. I wished to hold her hand as we walked down the street, hoping that her fingers would touch mine. Initially, I wondered what might have caused her to think I was too needy. What if I smothered her? I waited for the right moment, and we walked side by side, feeling an indescribable pain.

I had the intention of saying goodbye to her yesterday. I would wrap my arms around her and hold her for a few seconds, running my fingers through her hair to make sure

she was enough. But I didn't. In the face of constant rejection, how do you approach a simple request? I don't think I could cope with this again if it wasn't for her. It seems unlikely that I would want to remain in this place.' My strength is solely in her. The only thing that keeps me going is the thought of seeing her, and everything else seems to be falling apart.

And now, she was leaving.

The things I couldn't articulate were something I promised myself I'd say later. That I'd tell her everything. Express her emotions towards me.?

Might the woman be interested in hearing it at all? Might she perceive me as unintelligent?' Could I be perceived as overly demanding by her?

The thought made my chest feel sore.'

I wasn't ready for this.

The soft glow in Nikhat's eyes was reflecting off her phone as she sat across from me, looking up. It seemed as though the thought of leaving was not slowly dissipating inside her, just like it did with me. Maybe it wasn't. Perhaps it was a simpler experience for her.'

Maybe I was just struggling to keep it together.

Her voice tugged at me to my feet. "Fateh?".

I blinked. "Hmm?".

Looking at her, she tilted her head and asked, "Where have you gone now?".

Exhaling, I let out a loud cry of silence. "Nowhere."

She didn't believe me. The way her eyes narrowed and her lips lipped on mine made it clear that she must have been exhibiting strange behavior.

“I'm fine.”.

Despite studying me for an additional second, Nikhat didn't engage in any physical combat. She never did. I was granted the freedom to maintain my composure, pause and doubt when circumstances became challenging.

And I hated that. It was a source of shame for me that I had become so used to not saying things. My conviction was that it's best not to reveal anything or ruin the situation. Why? Despite my discomfort, I loathed the fact that she made me feel secure enough to want to reveal them.

Between watching her talk about Dubai and realizing we had less than a week left together, it hit me.

This wasn't a mere passing. She wasn't just another person who left me behind.. My safe-house, my sanctuary, and the one I'd depend on every day was being left by Nikhat. And I couldn't breathe. Felt like I was holding on to something, fingers gripping it and nothing could stop.

I had no idea how to do this.' How to let her go. Nevertheless, I was aware that I had to. The idea of preventing someone from doing it was never on my mind before. Was not motivated by a selfish desire to keep them close. I couldn't bear the thought of her being somewhere else when I was with her. And that's when it clicked. That was when I realized.

She was not exclusively departing.. It wasn't just me missing her. It was her.

It had always been her.

I was scared to hold her hand, but without hesitation, I had fallen asleep in her lap. Why? She was the one I had been searching for in my life, but I needed someone. The task at hand was a mystery to me. I felt a chill in my chest as I

observed her laughing at something on her phone, completely unaware of the war's intensity.

I had to do something. I couldn't just let her go in this way.

"Hey," I said suddenly.

With a gaze upwards, Nikhat raised an eyebrow. "What?"

I hesitated. Before departing, do you have any plans?

"My entire life is being planned for now," she scoffed. "I'm drowning in them."

I swallowed, swaying slightly. "Ah, no, right, before you go." Are you free?"

With curiosity running wild, she blinked at me. "What the hell is going on?" asked her.

My face shrugged, attempting to engage in a game. "I'm only interested in doing something." Before you go."

Nikhat briefly examined me and then smiled. "Agreeing." was the response. Yeah. I'd like that."

My heart was pounding, and I nodded off without even realizing it. My actions were a complete mystery to me. But there was one thing I knew without a doubt.

Without revealing her true feelings, I wasn't permitting her departure. She was my inspiration. Even if I wasn't capable of saying it directly. Despite the need to conceal it with whispered words and delicate gestures.

My plan was to have a goodbye party for her. Despite the fact that this was the final act I could execute for her before she left, I wanted to ensure she remembered it.

Chapter 13: Fateh

My words are insufficient for elucidating. My thoughts constantly turn up fragments, inconsistencies—beautiful and breathtaking; and... ugh, I can't even express my feelings for her. How do I even begin? She causes me to lose my ability to think.' Whenever she comes up to me, I feel like I'm losing my concentration and have feelings that are beyond comprehension. It's like an inability to reconcile these emotions. I desire to be in her company.' All day. All night. It is a display of possessiveness when someone says it out loud. This makes me feel like I'm attempting to keep something that is too liberated and extraordinary. Whenever we walk down the street, I want to hold her hand and rub it with my fingers. Could it be that she thinks I'm too needy and clingy? What if she feels smothered? So, I let the moment go and we walk beside each other, with a peaceful pain in our hearts that I cannot seem to articulate.

Last time, I longed to bid farewell to her. To wrap my arms around her and hold her for a brief moment to remind her that she's enough. But I didn't. I was clueless about how to ask. How can one ask for something that is easy to understand, without the fear of rejection? What would you do? It's like if I can't stand up for something or say something every time. I'm apprehensive that I will make it wrong and scare her away. Despite my eventual regret, I never engage in any activities. Without her presence, I doubt I would be able to endure another day on this campus.' There's no reason for me to continue living here. My strength is solely in her. When everything else seems to be falling apart, the only thing that motivates me is the thought of seeing her.

When will I be able to move forward? How many weeks will it take for me to see her again? I reserve the right to say it, even though I've never spoken before. I'll tell her everything. Let me share how I feel, as it's affecting my feelings. Would the words I mention make her feel like listening? Will she think I'm foolish? Might she perceive me as being too much for her? Just thinking about it makes me burst into tears."

Furthermore, flowers have a minor aspect. Will she like pink roses? She's always been a classic, low-key individual, not mentioning that fact. White roses, I think. Simple. Elegant. Just like her. My intention is to fly back with her when I finally see her. Five hours is all we need to do together.... Five hours. I could make that work. Just us. My aim is to make the most of every second, even though I don't know how.

Nothing is better than the thought of sitting beside her, hugged by her shoulder, and falling asleep together.' Oh, no! The feeling of happiness and tranquility that I feel every time I think about it is akin to the sensation of crackers. I'm going crazy for her, but it's the best thing."

It's ironic, though. Feeling terrified to hold her hand is terrifying. Without hesitation, I dozed off in her lap. The place where I rest my head is a place that makes everything seem effortless. I'm feeling vulnerable, unbridled in a way that has never felt on my own. However, I cannot justify the presence of a safety net in that vulnerability. I have never had any trust in her whatsoever.'" But I keep on trying. She's different. Despite my ignorance, I am certain that she is doing well. I've always had my own preferences and ideas about what I want and need. Why? Despite having made decisions in the past, they still hold significance with her. I've thrown all of them because she doesn't fit the mold.

She's not like the others. Her lack of resemblance to anyone is the reason why I feel more inclined to love her.

Despite her imperfections, I have feelings for her. It's not necessary for me to be perfect, and she shouldn't try. Seeing her with other individuals makes me feel like she's the one who keeps them together. She's the one they have to rely on when they need someone to lean on, even if she doesn't always make jokes. She is the unyielding force in every room, carrying herself with her weight without any indication of complaint. She pampers herself. Despite everything, she's strong and free from the need for assistance. Despite this, I am aware that she desires to be self-assured. She's the one she confides in when times are tough, the person who looks on even when she doesn't smile. A. And I want to be that person for her." It's my desire to be the one who makes her feel safe, respected and loved.

There has never been a time where I feel more comfortable sleeping in her lap or placing my head on her shoulder. The sensation has lifted as I can breathe again. However, I am aware that she is more than a strong support. There are times when she feels shattered and requires someone to remind her of her true strength. I aim to be that individual.' I aim to be the one who reminds her daily of how much she means to me, deserves it and is amazing.' The words never come out.

She consistently puts others before herself, putting everyone else first. It seems to me that nobody takes notice of it. The brief instances when she stumbles and requires someone to lift her are not visible to them. They are unaware of how much she labors without asking for anything in return.

But I do. I see her. The fact that I cannot disclose this to her is a fatal choice.

She's magical. There's no other way to say it. She moves through everything, lighting up a room without even bothering to look at it. She's a natural wonder, but she lacks the ability to comprehend what it is. Why? At what point will I have the confidence to say it, sweet souls? At what point will I conquer this fear? Request. Why is it that I don't have the same thoughts about her?

Why is it that nobody comprehends that if she wears jhumkas, someone should be giving her compliments without asking for them? Do you find it hard to convey to her that she's working hard, deserves a break, and is satisfied with herself? Why are people not valuing her?' I am willing to do whatever it takes to show her appreciation. She is not capable of achieving the minimum required.

But me? I have no idea how to demonstrate that. Her perception is probably that I'm frigid, aloof, and distant. To some extent, I am. There are many things I want to express but feel hesitant to share. I'm scared. Scared that I'll mess it up, and afraid of kicking her out. I remain silent and keep everything inside..

Her thoughts are always on my mind. Even when we're not together, I feel like I'm always there for her. All the time spent apart are just extensions on those moments. I have dreams of her when she's not present, and when I come across them again it'll be as if we've never met before. Even when she's not present, she remains with me.

I just have to get this out of my mind.' This is something I can't endure for any longer. Why?

What is the best way to communicate with someone you can always turn to, being quiet in a chaotic situation, your first

thought upon awakening, and the last one before closing your eyes? Is there a way to clarify that without making it seem like too much? Without making them feel obligated to repay you?

Nikhat was leaving. And I—I was just here. I was stuck in a position where it was impossible to leave.

The thought occurred to me of all the times I wished to say something or let someone go and all those moments I allowed myself to slip. Every moment I had with him, we sat together as though it was a memory, something to remember when silence became too much to bear. But now I was coming to terms with something that. Those moments weren't enough. Memories, talks and small gestures were what I desired more.' The. I wanted her.

My intention was to become the companion she relied on after a long day. My intention was to be the person who spotted her exhaustion and communicated to her that she wasn't always the strong one. The intention was for me to be the one who fully encountered her, in all of her hidden ways and never looked away.

She was entitled to the entire world, and if she agreed, I would give her one. But would she? Was I just a part of the character's story and eventually she would let me go?

The idea came to mind like a mineral deposit in my chest. "

I pulled a hand through my chest and let out spit in anger. I needed to stop thinking. Overthinking. In what way could I proceed if she was already gone for a few days? How would life be without her? I was unsure. I had to do something. I had to ensure that she understood something, if not everything. A piece of it. A portion of her significance to me.'

A farewell party.

The idea was a sudden arrival, but once it was agreed upon, it made sense. Her departure was deemed important by her. It's not just for me, but for everyone else. To those who were too consumed with their own lives to acknowledge her significance..

I could do that. I would do that.

Even with all the activities planned for the party, I was still haunted by a persistent and unresolvable question.

Would I have the courage to say it? To tell her how much she means to me? How much I love her, just the way she is?

Chapter 14: Fateh

It was over.

I lost the strange and unspoken connection that had held me in her grasp. Maybe it was just a dream, and I had never experienced it before.

Perhaps for the entire time, I had been mistaking small moments with larger things. It's possible that she was just being Nikhat. She was present with everyone. Kind. Warm. Thoughtful.

But never mine.

I confidently assumed it was alright. That it didn't matter. It always seemed like this. Nevertheless, I found myself in the middle of the cafe, setting up her farewell party like an imposter who didn't know when to stop. The banner above the entrance said Goodbye, Nikhat! Despite its intended message of cheerful farewell, it was actually a slow and peaceful process. The corner of the banner was left unchanged, and I made a third correction. So I stooped down, arms crossed over my chest, and stared at it.

The words retreated towards me.

Goodbye.

I swallowed a lump that had formed in my throat. This was what she deserved. A proper farewell. A room full of people who loved her.' In. A time when she was able to be in the middle of it all, laughing and smiling like everyone else and being celebrated.

Despite everything, I had a clear understanding of the truth. This wasn't for her. It was for me.

One last hold on something that was already slipping down my leg.

My thoughts were numb to the present moment as Pratyush's words trickled down my spine.

He was standing obliquely against the table, his arms clasped, and giving me that knowing look that made me feel bitter.

"Yeah.

"I screamed, twisting the sleeves of my hoodie."

Pratyush nodded in agreement. "You've been looking at that banner like it's causing you harm personally."

"I squished my eyes. It's only perfect."

He asked, "What about Nikhat?" with a raised eyebrow.

"Of course, " is a premature conclusion, as I responded."

Initially, Pratyush didn't give a damn. I was constantly on the edge of his seat, as if to give me a push. I wished he wouldn't. I desired him to drop it, allow me to complete my tasks, and move forward. Thank you.

But that wasn't Pratyush.

"He began by stepping off the counter, emphasizing that anyone who persists in saying nothing is doing anything to be seen as everything."

I locked my jaw tightly. "I'm unsure of what you want."

"Are you truly in love with her?" he asked, his voice lessening. He then moved closer to the subject.

There was something on my chest that grew tight, but I had to shrug and say, "What if I were?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again, as Pratyush exhaled and shook his head. "Why are you letting her go without telling?," he said. I don't know what to say.

That I was too scared? It was clear to me at the depths that she wouldn't have eyes like hers anymore. No matter how many times I reminisced, there was never any instance where she felt anything of mine. The back of my head rubbed.

I laughed with a lack of humor. "You keep repeating that, but it's true." Instead, I focused on the table where the cake would be placed, turning away from him and saying, "She'll leave soon.". Her life in Dubai is one to be dedicated to. The. "It's possible that it won't be helpful.". Maybe all. Unless you make an effort, the outcome is uncertain. ".

"I shook my head in pain, grabbed a bunch of streamers and broke it open with great force. It's all over, Pratyush.". I won't make her last day here any easier." Pratyush sighed. He remarked, "I'd rather be careful than to think that I'm fine with doing this.

I didn't respond. What purpose did we leave it behind? I wasn't okay. And I wouldn't be. Not for a long time.

She ordered a chocolate cake because she disliked anything other than chocolate in desserts. There are no fancy decorations, and no icing. Just something simple. Something real.

By dimming the lights, they created a warmth and golden aura that would blend in with their goodbye notes. A playlist I created was playing in the background, with melodious songs that she favored and subdued ones she could hear when she believed no one was paying attention.

The guest list was made by me. Only the individuals who truly mattered. They who would be saddened by her

absence. People who wouldn't simply send a few messages but could also feel her laughter, energy, and warmth disappearing.

Except me. I didn't count. I shouldn't count.

Changing the chairs, I put my hands through both of my hair, trying to forget what looked like her last time we spoke. With a smile that was uncomplicated and effortless, she felt like she was not breaking free from her own thoughts. Her experience was less demanding than mine.'

I detested the fact that I wished it would be difficult for her. My desire to be involved was too strong for her, and I felt a sense of regret about my decision. But she wasn't hesitating. She was going. I had to come to terms with it.' I checked my phone. She arrived an hour later, dressed and excited, but unaware of my slow undoing inside. I exhaled slowly.

This was it. The final option I could make for her. The final option I could make for her. I was done with tonight's routine. Why? The café became a hub of conversation and laughter as people started pouring in. I snuck at some of them with manageable little smiles, but I didn't. It was easier that way.

And then she arrived.

Nikhat.

She entered with the feeling of being everywhere.' Her hair sported down her back, silver earrings shimmering beneath the lights of the café.' She looked... happy. Not the forced kind. The real kind. That made something within me turn and hurt painfully.' After watching her, I briefly stopped and then looked away.

Pratyush greeted her first, hugging her and she smiled, leaning into the embrace like she was being welcomed.

She had a tendency to be friendly and easy-going. But not with me. It's possible that I was only slightly uncomfortable with her. As I looked elsewhere, the lump in my throat was gone, and I pushed down with both hands into them. I had work to do.

Pratyush was a force to be reckoned with, loud and charming as ever.

"I can't believe you're leaving us, Nikhat," he said softly, his heart breaking in despair. "Who is the rightful complainer on campus for the terrible coffee?"

To whom can I request reminders for my assignments? Who'll flirt with me?"

He can be found anywhere and I'm sure you find someone else to put your head up,' Nikhat said while nudging his arm.

He sighed and raised his head, acknowledging that was accurate.

The crowd around them chuckled, but I stayed silent, watching from a distance as Pratyush soaked in the moment, completely at ease.

I envied him.

Not because he was closer to her—not in the way I wanted to be—but because he wasn't hesitant like I was. He never held back. If he wanted to say something, he said it. If he wanted to hug her, he did. He wasn't trapped in his own head the way I was.

Maybe that's why Nikhat always looked comfortable around him. Maybe that's why she never had to second-guess his presence in her life.

I clenched my jaw and turned away, grabbing a drink from the counter just for something to do.

Pratyush had taken over the party now, making toasts, telling stories about Nikhat that had everyone laughing. She sat there, beside him, smiling, glowing in the warmth of it all.

It wasn't that I didn't belong. It was just that I wasn't needed.

Eventually, as the party started winding down, I found myself back at the corner table—our table. Nikhat must have noticed, because a while later, she made her way over, sitting down across from me like she had done so many times before.

She smiled at me. “You okay?”.

“Yeah,” I lied.

She hummed, watching me for a second before looking down at the table.

“This is where it all started,” she said quietly.

I swallowed. “Yeah.”.

“You remember our first conversation?”.

Of course, I did.

She had been ranting about some professor, and I had made some offhand remark, and just like that, we had fallen into something that had never quite let me go.

But I only nodded.

She traced patterns on the table with her fingers, lost in thought. “I'm gonna miss this.”.

I forced out a chuckle. “Yeah, yeah, you'll be too busy in Dubai to think about this dusty old café.”.

She frowned. “That's not true.”.

"Isn't it?" I asked, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

She looked at me then, really looked at me, like she was trying to figure something out.

I looked away first.

The party started winding down after that. People left, hugging her, making promises to visit.

And then, eventually, it was just us.

I stood near the counter, watching as she picked up her bag, adjusting the strap on her shoulder.

"So," she said, forcing a smile. "I guess this is it."

I nodded.

She hesitated. "You'll keep in touch, right?"

Something inside me cracked.

She didn't get it.

She didn't understand that I couldn't do this halfway. That I couldn't be just her friend when my heart had never been just her friend's.

So I smiled.

And I lied.

"Of course."

She looked at me for a long moment, like she didn't quite believe me.

But then she nodded.

And then she was walking away.

And I just stood there, letting her go.

Letting her go, because for the first time, I knew—.

She was never really mine to hold onto.

But that didn't make it hurt any less.

I watched as she reached the door, her figure framed by the warm glow of the streetlights outside. She paused for half a second—just a breath of hesitation, barely noticeable—before stepping out.

Gone.

I exhaled slowly, running a hand down my face as if that would somehow wipe away the ache that had settled deep inside my chest.

I had done everything right. I had given her the send-off she deserved. I had smiled, played my part, kept my distance. And yet, standing in the empty café now, the silence around me pressing in, I felt like I had lost something far greater than just a friend.

I sat down at our table—the one she had left just moments ago. The place still smelled like her, faint traces of her perfume lingering in the air. The ghost of her presence wrapped itself around me, and I let my head fall into my hands.

This was it.

There was no going back.

She had left, and I was supposed to move on. To go back to life as if nothing had changed.

But everything had changed.

I had spent so long convincing myself that whatever existed between us was temporary—that it was nothing more than a passing moment, something I could let go of whenever I needed to.

But I had been wrong.

This wasn't just a moment. It was a weight, settling deep in my bones, refusing to leave.

I clenched my fists.

In what way should I have returned to a life without her? Request.

How come I couldn't look at her while sitting in this cafe?

What could be the reason for me to not anticipate meeting her every morning? Is it possible?

The truth slowly poured in, heavy and unmistakable.

I had been fooling myself.

The bond was more than just friendship.

This wasn't just admiration.

I loved her.

She was left behind by me without any warning.

I gave her the silent treatment by letting her walk free.

With a tentative breath, I gazed at the empty seat across from me, my regret against the wall.

Maybe this was what I deserved.'

This could be the end result of an unvarying fate.'".

She would proceed to Dubai, and then move on. She'd encounter fresh individuals, establish a new existence, and discover someone who wouldn't be afraid to try again.

And me?

I would stay here.

Right where she left me.

Chapter 15: Nikhat

As I stepped out of the café, the night air was still thick with laughter and longing goodbyes. My heart should have been light.' The. It should have been full. Ultimately, the party of fare was... flawless.

Too perfect.

This kind of perfect, but not real.

I wrapped my shawl around me, my fingers resting on the fabric as I exhaled slowly. Still, it was all so quiet. The entire evening was a monotonous cycle of thoughts that I couldn't turn off.

I was surprised by the number of people who showed up. I had not spoken to anyone in months, including my friends, classmates, and even acquaintances.... They all came together to bid me farewell and celebrate in a way I had never witnessed before. In the midst of everything, Fateh was responsible for making sure everything was alright.

Fateh.

Tonight, I was unsure of how to react to his presence.

He'd been... different.

Not outwardly. Perhaps he was just the same Fateh, with his hands in his pockets and eyes twinkling between me as well as everyone else. His smile was always right, he laughed when appropriate, and even joked about sending postcards from Dubai.

But something was missing.

It could be that something was too prevalent.

Despite my lack of explanation, his gaze upon me tonight seemed to suggest that the person was trying to carve out their own identity for the night. I had witnessed him staring at me, but he suddenly stopped looking and didn't respond. There was something he wanted to say, but lacked the right words.

Then, he had the option to give me a hug.

Not really, it hadn't been long. Barely a few seconds. Yet again, Fateh had been the one to hold on for a little while at least. Someone whose hold was ever so slightly tight before they let go. He had been looking at me and seemed to want something more, something that was always on his lips.

And I had felt it.

I still experienced the warmth of his hands on my back and felt the steady weight beside me, even as I stood alone in the dimly lit streetlights.

What was that?

I trembled to clear my mind.'

It's possible that I was overanalyzing the content. Perhaps it was the end of everything. After all, we were friends. Close friends. It was expected to feel something when you knew your farewell was coming.

How come there was a feeling of excitement and expectation at the time?

I sighed, rubbing my temples. Maybe I was overthinking.

Or maybe... Pratyush was right.

I halved and breathed.

Pratyush.

His spoken words from a few days ago were now evident and understood more clearly than before. Do you truly believe that Fateh doesn't like you?

During that time, I had disregarded it, shrugged it off. Fateh liking me? It was ridiculous. Wasn't it?

After he looked at me and whispered "take care," I wasn't entirely sure tonight.

Did he have something to say before we said goodbye? Did I cause an interruption without intending to? Was there something I had omitted from my understanding?

My stomach twisted.

No. That didn't make sense. Fateh wasn't like that. He'd never—.

However, my thoughts turned to how often he has been quiet around me. On occasions he was on the verge of saying something and then abruptly stopped. His eyes were always on my mind in a packed room, as if searching for my presence.

My confidence in him was never compromised.

I took a shaky breath.

Was it possible? Could Fateh really—?

No.

I shook my head, ready to stop.' But this wasn't the time to spiral. It would be a few days before I left. It didn't matter what I believed I saw. Fateh was my friend. He always had been. That was all.

Why did it feel like something has changed?

I exhaled deeply and comforted myself while walking along the empty street. The café was long gone, but my thoughts

remained. And they clung on tightly, weaving in and out of my air, trying to hold me off.

Did Fateh have a consistent state throughout the entire night? I was still being ridiculed by him for my habit of adding more sugar to the top portion of my chai. He had maintained a low profile, never fully engaging in public, but always maintaining vigilance and observation. Additionally? His presence had remained constant, never changing.

Why did it feel so different?

I couldn't pinpoint what it was about tonight that made it feel so damned definitive. Not solely because I was leaving....

He appeared to be relinquishing.'

He had already reconciled with something I was not aware of.'

I couldn't put into words how it hurt. It was so painful.

The night may have been influenced by other factors. Maybe I was overanalyzing everything. His gaze upon me during the last moment we said goodbye was still vivid in my mind. He had a raw, indecisive feeling within his eyes.

Afterward, there was the embrace.

Fateh wasn't the type to hold off. Why? He was someone who kept a safe distance, staying just 'a bit closer'.? Even so, tonight, for a split second, he had pulled me in just as much. Just enough for me to feel it.

Feel what, though?

As I walked, I reached out and touched my forehead with frustration. It was hard to shake.

I didn't know. I didn't know anything.

I was only aware of something tonight that felt too great to ignore.'

Maybe Pratyush was right.

I breathed in deeply as the thought resurfaced.

Is it your perception that Fateh does not have a favorable view of you?

The comment made my laughter. Had put aside the thought like it was absurd.'. Standing alone in the street, with only my thoughts as compass, I didn't laugh.

Could it be true? Could Fateh really—?

No.

I shook my head in shock, refusing to accept the thought.' That wasn't Fateh and I. Those were the things we had never experienced before.

But hadn't I wondered before?

Why did he stare at me sometimes when I thought 'I didn't look him in'? Wasn't I aware of the instances where he hesitated, as if hesitant but unwilling to say anything?

Was there a reason why I never felt more secure around him?

With my fingers gripping tightly around me, I took a quick breath.

How would I interpret the fact that Fateh had an actual experience, as Pratyush had stated?

Did I feel the same?

My heart shattered with the thought.'

This is something that I had never contemplated. Not really. My life was always being dominated by Fateh. Such

a person, I never had to question myself. These individuals who were familiar with me at times, but not always by my side.

But love?

The word felt too big. Too overwhelming. Too much.

I strived to make things happen and imagine ourselves.'

Fateh and me.

Trying to picture what it would have been like if he had spoken tonight. Had he owned up to whatever was concealed in his eyes throughout the evening.?' If he'd said he—.

I swallowed it whole and the thought just didn't come through.

This was ridiculous. I was leaving. I had planned to leave behind a new life and spend thousands of miles away.?' Whatever this was, whatever emotion I was feeling... nothing mattered.

But it didn't feel like.

I should have seen it earlier.' The. Something I should have known.

In fact, there was something inside me that knew.

I always knew something.

It didn't make me ready to face it.

I wasn't prepared to unbride my chest, to name the warmth that always lingered in Fateh. The pain I felt tonight was too overwhelming for me to accept, as I was unsure of how to resolve the change in our relationship.

That's what I did as a regular practice.

I buried it.

I penetrated deeply into the part of me that was unable to handle situations like this. It's hard to shake.

I resumed walking, as if moving forward would help me move past the thoughts that were bothering me.

But they stayed.

Fateh's tradition meant that they stayed.

Chapter 16: Fateh

With only the scent of chai remaining, the café was now empty and quiet. Everyone had left. The farewell party was over.

Fateh sat in his car, still, staring at the darkened street like he was waiting for something, but unsure of what it was. This strange, sinking feeling in his chest to subside may be the cause. A brief rewind could give him an additional opportunity. Perhaps?

Allowing myself to speak the truth as I should have.

But the night was over. The moment was gone. And Nikhat—Nikhat was leaving.

With a quick breath, he held onto the steering wheel until it became white on his knuckles.

Tonight had been perfect. At least it should have been. He meticulously planned everything, including the fairy lights hanging in a cafe, the music she listens to every morning, her favorite chai, and extra sugar. All of this was well-planned. His presence made her feel unique. Confirmed her recognition and respect for others.'

But not to him.

Not really.

He failed to acknowledge the burning sensation in his chest that had been lingering for months, despite all the speeches, goodbyes, and laughter.

He'd almost confessed.

Almost.

Just on his lips, the words had been waiting for him. For a brief moment, he believed regaining it.

She gazed at him at the end of the night, his softness always lingering in her eyes. It was such a peaceful moment.

She had whispered, "I miss you," before moving on to a more serious note.

And that had been it.

That had been his moment.

His chance to say, "I'll accompany you, don't let me make you feel neglected.". Because I love you. It's important for me to be present in your life.

But he'd just smiled instead. Nodded like an idiot. Confused about something delicate but painfully empty.

"Me too. ".

And now, she was gone.

Fateh's hair was gently ruffled with a bitter smile.

He was a coward. The truth was in the pudding. Despite his initial disbelief, he quickly came to the realization that she was more than just a friend and only viewed her as merely an admiration. But it wasn't. It had never been.

With every smile she made he tightened his grip. The way he watched her, memorizing her language and movements.". The sensation that he could breathe when she was nearby and the feeling that everything was being consumed by his body when they were not.

It was love. It had always been love.

He had not yet realised it.

Could you clarify what was meant?

The life of Nikhat was not exclusive to him, but a new beginning. The way she talked about her plans, the excitement in her voice, and the dazzling sparkle in all her actions were visible to him. It was like seeing someone else do everything.

She was going to be fine without him.

And he....

He would need to find a way out of her absence.'...

His hands were pressed against his lap.

He should have said something. Should have done something.

What if she didn't have the same feelings towards me? What if he'd ruined everything?

He had never experienced anything like Nikhat. He didn't think he could have survived if she had given him a chance to look at him with any hesitation or uncertainty.

He had followed his usual course of action.

He'd let her go.

As he sat in his car, looking out from the empty cabin, pondering if a major mistake had been made.

Chapter 17: Nikhat

At the very moment the plane departed, I felt it. The weight in my chest that I had been carrying lifted, as the city I'd known for years slipped beneath me. It was like feeling lighter than ever before. The light glimmered across the window and faded away to just golden specks, blocking the darkness.

The paradox of something having both a beginning and an end. was strange.?

For the past week, I had been avoiding tears for an extended period. It was heartbreaking. I would leave with a clear head, without any doubts or hesitations. I had mostly met my objectives. The farewell party, the goodbyes, and the packing at the last minute were all handled by me. While sitting in a window seat that was thousands of feet above the ground, I felt an unease.

I had been abandoned.

It was a decision I made with conviction. I knew that the next part of my life was within reach, and I had moved beyond what I experienced in my past. Nonetheless, I still felt the pain.'

With my head bowed, I closed my eyes and watched the plane silently snarl. The thought of slumber left me perplexed as my mind was still spinning with everything that had been written on it and what I had forgotten.

The flight staff moved through the aisles, and the pulsating of beverage carts reminded me of what was happening at that moment. I requested tea, but it didn't make a difference as my fingers were curled around the cup for comfort.

While looking down, I observed the passengers beside me, who were all wandering around in their own universe. Some were asleep, with their heads bowed against the seats, while others were perusing their phones, lost in the conversations or other distractions that could be expected beyond the plane.

The first time I had been alone for quite some time was this.

There was no one present to greet me on the plane. I didn't see a familiar face at the arrivals gate, and my phone wasn't responding when someone asked me when I would be home. I experienced something that was jarring to me, one that left me feeling uneasy.

Could this be my dream? I doubt it.

A fresh start. A new life.

If I said them back, it would become familiar and alleviate my inner turmoil. It felt like a mantra to me.

It wasn't entirely a new city to me, as I had already been there, walked the roads and learned all the shortcuts. Nevertheless, this time it was more than just a visit. Once again, I wasn't returning to the comfort of my former self when the trip ended.

This time, I was staying.

I exited the airport with my bags swaying, feeling worn out and having difficulty moving around. It was a crisp night, with the slight lingering rain on the air, and I stood there for ten minutes, waiting for it to set in.

This was real.

I rang the taxi and gave the driver my updated address, and as the city lights flashed across the window, I felt a strange rush of excitement. Although the roads were different, it

wasn't disturbing and the skyline was unfamiliar. If anything, it was liberating.

After the car parked near my apartment building, I took a deep breath and exited. The lobby was inaccessible at this time, and the elevator's ride up was longer than anticipated. My hands were shaking as I opened the door, pushing it open to reveal what was inside.

There were boxes against the walls, simple furniture and few pieces of furniture but it didn't feel empty. It felt like a possibility.

With my bags in hand, I pushed my hair back and forth while exploring my new home. It was small, but cozy; if I let myself be in it, the place would feel so much closer to my soul.

It is what I would do, it will be mine.

I spent the first few days unpacking and figuring out the rhythms in my new life. It was a blur.

I established a routine that involved taking walks in the quiet streets in mornings, spending afternoons at the nearby café where the barista had already given me my order, and relaxing with naughty books in calming surroundings as the day progressed.

I was generally in a good place.

Naturally, there were brief instances of uncertainty and solitude. I would sometimes reach for my phone, wanting to send a message before taking off. Why did this happen?

This was my choice.

A fresh start meant the absence of memories.'".

Despite feeling like I was missing something, it meant pushing on.

It was precisely what I had planned to do.

Despite my expectations, it wasn't as easy as I had assumed.

On certain occasions, I experienced confusion upon waking up. When my apartment became too quiet and unfamiliar with me. Walking through a city filled with unfamiliar individuals left me feeling alienated. Why? (Laughter)

Doubts were present in those moments. Had I made a mistake? Was my abandonment unjustifiable?

I confidently claimed that I could handle this." I knew this was the life of my dreams.

But sometimes, I wasn't sure.

My days were full of distractions, including long work hours and easygoing new friends.

I didn't reflect on the past. I didn't let myself.

I didn't think I could continue if I proceeded, which was not certain.

I found myself walking back home from work in a small bookstore on secluded land, with the sky brightened with orange and pink hues.

As I entered, the bell above my door rang, and there was a scent of coffee and old pages nearby.

I simply strode past the back covers of books, without seeking anything specific—just wanting to be in the moment.

I stumbled upon an unmarked book, perusing its pages, and the words blended together.

After a few weeks, I experienced reassurance for the first time.

Moving forward didn't have to involve completely forgetting.

Perhaps it was simply a means of making room for new things, new moments, and new individuals.

Maybe I'll get there, eventually.

I tried to move on, but the past kept coming back. Why?

The small details, such as my tendency to glance at my phone without getting a message, were the main focus. I paused before allocating certain words, as if speaking to them would bring back memories.

Sometimes, I felt like I was losing my mind due to exhaustion, and I nearly missed out on everything. It was a challenge.

I focused on the present. I immersed myself in my work and new acquaintances. I made plans, set goals.

For the most part, it worked.

I laughed. I explored new places. My personality was reconstructed, and I may have felt more like myself.

However, there was still a period of silence. Instances where something stayed concealed, in my memory.'

A term I was hesitant to articulate.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

The act of moving on was more than just a matter of letting go.

What we could keep was the focus of discussion.

Chapter 18: Fateh

She was gone.
Really gone.

This moment was something I had anticipated. Seeing her pack up her life, saying my goodbyes and getting on that plane, I had no intention of leaving. Day after day, I pretended to be okay with it, assuming I was prepared.

There was nothing that prepared me for the sensation of it all.

For the silence. For the absence of her presence..

The city no longer felt authentic to me, and I sat on the hood of my car. They were the same streets I walked past many times with her. The absence of her would make them feel like they were living in a different world.

I exhaled deeply, my hands touching my face, trying to rid myself of the weight that had held onto me since the farewell party. A strange, hollow sensation that didn't occur suddenly but gradually engulfed my consciousness.

Nikhat was gone. There were uncertainties regarding my ability to regain her trust. We had a rough start. My anticipation was always for her presence. It was ridiculous, really. Every afternoon, I would gaze at the spot where she always waited for me during lazy afternoons; when I remembered that there was no one nearby to comfort me.

Whenever I would reach out to her, my phone would prompt me to text her first, but then take a moment to stop and type the first word. What would I even say?

"How's the new place? "

"Do you miss me? "

I wonder if you feel the same way.

No. I couldn't do that to myself. She was moving forward. And I had to release her as well. Still, there were instances of vulnerability. At times, I would lie awake at night, staring at the ceiling, and replay our last conversation. Her smile during the farewell party and her hugging gesture that seemed like she was holding onto something for a little while. In those final moments, her eyes seemed to be captivated by my suggestion of words she had written but couldn't articulate them. Perhaps I had done the same thing.' Maybe I had the guts to watch her leave, knowing that I should have spoken more. But I hadn't. At that point, it was too late.

The absence of her made a significant impact on my days. The café where we frequented felt smaller and suffocating. Her book recommendations were left untouched on my desk, and now I was reading too many stories. She had also dog-eyed me.

Even her friends were aware of the change.

Pratyush observed me from the side of his coffee cup, stating that "you are not listening now" one afternoon.

My response was "I've never been very quiet," even though I could speak clearly.

Not like this, " he murmured, head shaking.

Despite his statement, I looked away and was unwilling to believe it.

Because I had lost something. Perhaps I never had it in the first place.' I was certain that I would eventually become accustomed to it. Over time, the ache of missing her would diminish and become less burdensome to bear.

The timing wasn't working that way. It worsened, if anything. It made me realize how much of an impact she had had on my life. My days were encircled by numerous small pieces.' Not only the big moments, but also the small ones. The ones I had taken for granted. Without any prior notice, she would steal every last bit of my food. Her mute when she was lost in thought.'

Her recollection of trivial details about people, such as their preferred drinks and unpleasant moments. She was always paying attention. Always caring. I had no idea that someone was doing the same thing for her at that point.'

There was more than one obstacle between us. It was something deeper. The woman felt like she was in a different world, not just in another city. My role in a world that was no longer my own.

And I hated that. The knowledge that her days were now unknown was something I loathed. I loathed being unsure of her happiness, struggles, or solutions. She was always my go-to person when situations became tough.'... It made me uncertain if I was authorized to call her. That was possibly the primary cause of pain.

I knew it wouldn't be the same if I were to pick up the phone and send a message, even though. Because things had changed. Because we had changed. During my leisurely drive around the city, I suddenly saw where I was going.

My hands were moving without any effort from my muscles, guiding me to an area I had not planned to visit.

The bookstore. Our bookstore.

I was parked outside with the steering wheel in my hand, heart racing with an unsteady pace. She wasn't here. She wasn't coming. But I couldn't bring myself to leave. I

entered while the bell rang and old books were wrapped around me like a familiar hug. It was euphonious.

I slowly made my way through the aisles, rubbing against the covers of books I had never read and feeling stillness around me. A book within me caught my attention immediately upon reaching a shelf, and I looked back without hesitation. The one she had demanded I read.'

You will love this," she said. "I can assure you."

I had never read it. Then I thought, I don't think I can.". Taking my food was tough, and I had to keep my eyes down. It didn't feel like this when you were moving forward, wasn't?

A slow, quiet acceptance. The capacity to release the things that no longer serve you.' What led to the feeling that I was losing a part of myself during the process? Days turned into weeks. Gradually, I began to embrace it. She wasn't coming back. A new life had been created by her. A new routine. I didn't participate.?

I made a decision that this was the way it should be. This was precisely what she had a desire for. Perhaps I had never been as significant as I believed in the grand scheme of things. Maybe I had been preserving something that was only present in my mind all through.' The idea made my heart swell, making my fingers stick together.'... Because I knew the truth. I had let her go. I had slipped into hiding without confessing her true feelings.' Currently, I am required to endure it. There was no way to go back. Why? Not anymore. She was gone. I needed a method of managing it.'".

Chapter 19: Nikhat

I was fine.
That's what I told myself.

I experienced a new city, sky and life every morning.² It seemed as though my days had never been altered. My bags were unpacked, my bookshelves filled with pictures and I decorated the walls in photos that would have been a dream come true.

And yet, it didn't. Something was missing. Something that I couldn't even articulate. I confessed that the only reason I cared was to adjust and find ways to stay in. In the near future, I would stop seeking out what wasn't present. I would cease missing something that was not my own to miss.'

When it was dark outside, I found myself alone in the city and couldn't stop thinking about things.

I missed him.

It began with the small-scale aspects. Whenever I would reach for my phone, I had an urge to text him, but upon closer inspection, there was no response and I realized I hadn't done anything wrong. Whenever I heard a joke, I thought, "Fateh would be sooo funny," but there was no one to share it with. As I passed by a bookstore, my fingers would feel like pulling the trigger and buying something for him. I had never consciously adjusted to being without him. It seemed as though he had an uncanny connection to all my thoughts, habits, and small moments in life. After a considerable distance, I was finally experiencing it for what we were.

The first week after moving was a smooth transition.' The unfamiliarity of it all diverted my attention. It had boxes to open, shopping lists to make, and roads to memorize. All of that. Each morning, I found it difficult to adjust to new habits, such as finding coffee, using the subway, and getting lost on my way to the university campus. However, the silence ceased.'

Silent moment that no amount of background noise could replace.' The. The silence that made me feel like I had lost something, and could not put it back. Where there was nothing, I found myself looking for bits of familiarity. My aim was to fill the void by starting new habits—morning walks, coffee-drinking during late hours at coffee shops, and weekend trips to bookshops. Despite the passing moments, my thoughts were directed towards him.

He used to make fun of me for my crappy sense of direction. Why? Despite knowing that I needed space, he never made me feel lonely. His presence had always been a part of my life, but now it no longer exists.

One evening, I found myself in front of a cafe near my apartment, staring out the glass door and seeing dozens of friends laughing at each other over coffee.

It was a sight I had seen only ten times before. The simplicity of it was remarkable. But I was struck differently by it. The thought occurred to me of Fateh's teasing about the amount of sugar I added to my coffee, and how he always instructed me on what I wanted. His habit of stealing my fries and his shoulder always coming into contact with mine as we walked. His occasional glance towards me, as if I were something to hold onto. How it worked.

After leaving, I allowed myself to ponder this question for the first time.

Suppose I had made an error, what would occur?

Suppose Pratyush had been right about the farewell party, what would have happened?

What if Fateh had an emotional connection with me? If I had spent a significant amount of time in denial about our friendship, what would have occurred to me? Was my understanding flawed?

The idea sent my heart racing, releasing air from my throat. Why? If it's true and he had almost confessed that night, it meant I had left something that could have been genuine. ".

The realization was slow and firm, resembling the bleeding of ink into paper. I recollected every moment, interaction, touch, and silence within us. My mind was freed from the memories of everything I had neglected earlier. Despite knowing that I needed space, he never made me feel lonely. Even I forgot the things he paid attention to about me. He gave me a sense of recognition that was not possible with others. There was no sign of concern or hesitation when I laid my head in his lap that night, even after being completely silent.

Only peace. Only home.

A lump appeared in my throat, and my fingers were tense around the strap of my bag. I loved him. The realization was as overwhelming as a hurricane, blowing air from my lungs. I loved him. I had never witnessed it in my entire life.'

After that, I stumbled back from the café window with my thoughts in a chaotic state. This changed everything. And yet... it changed nothing. I was present, but Fateh had not moved. I had spent a significant amount of time running from something that I was unaware of. Because I had left. And he'd let me go. A dull pain was felt beneath my ribcage, with the sensation of chest tightening. Suppose it was too

late, what would happen? What if he had already moved on? How would my life have been different if I had done everything wrong?

The next few days were clouded, with no opportunity to concentrate or think outside the box.... Each time I closed my eyes, I saw him. Whenever I tried to get away, my thoughts instantly turned to him. Was there any indication that he was thinking about me or just missing me? I asked myself this question. I had been eager to hear his voice for weeks. Not through a text. Not through a call. In person. I wanted to see him. I wanted to know.

I was unable to appear suddenly. The prospect of returning to him with the same life was beyond me. He'd let me go. It was now up to me to determine if he harbored any affection for me. I spent the next week debating with myself and contemplating every possible scenario, replaying each and every conversation we had ever had.

I imagined seeing him again. Would he be indifferent? Did he smile without any indication of change? Is it possible? Would I perceive the same weight, desire, and unspoken sentiments in his eyes? And what if he didn't? What if I didn't get to where I needed to be? I felt more scared than I used to be.

Nonetheless, the result was consistently identical. I had to go back. Not just to see him. Not just to get closure. But to be straightforward. To finally utter the words I had been blind for.' Even after a considerable amount of time, I couldn't escape from the presence of him.

Chapter 20: Fateh

I had lost her.

You cannot lose a set of keys or forget your wallet's location. No, this was something deeper. More final. Before you even know it's gone, everything is like a doorway closing, the thread is snapping, and the star is burning out.

Nikhat was gone. And she wasn't coming back. I trusted in my own instincts that it would be unavoidable. The probability of it occurring was high. This is how life worked: people left, distance grew, and some things didn't happen. Nevertheless, it didn't ease the exhaustion. The discomfort remained in my chest until it became unbearable, wrapping around the bones of mine.

I spent my days like a baby.

Everything felt dull, muted. Food had no taste. Conversations blurred together. I laughed appropriately, nodded when necessary, but I wasn't there.

Because she wasn't. Without her presence, my world had become a mystery to me. How strange was it? She used to sit in a vacant area next to mine. The absence of someone to share my messages, jokes, and books made them unreachable.

It was in the silence. God, the silence. Her voice infused my everyday life like the sound of music, making me feel alive and content. Having lost it, I was unable to function without it. I missed her. In ways that felt unfair. It made me wonder if this was truly love.

No—there was no wondering anymore. I knew.

Her being had my best interest. Maybe from the very beginning. She entered my life as a chaotic and hilarious individual with an unbreakable bond that scared me.'

Maybe it had started to trickle down my veins, over time, before I even got a chance to feel it. Her perception of me made me feel valuable, she challenged me without making me uncomfortable. She had never allowed me to feel alone in this way. Why?

Her absence of my love was a secret to hers.

Without her asking, I brought her in the extra coffee.

I made sure she walked on the inside of the sidewalk.'''.

By memorizing the things she loved, including the books she adored, her dislike for saying goodbyes, and her constant humming when she was lost in thought, I managed to keep everything in my head.

Despite my deep affection for her, I chose to remain silent about it.

And now, I never would.

I loathed having come so close.' The.

I had a heart-wrenching experience at her farewell party, where everyone in my life was screaming to say something. It happened the next night. To tell her. To let her know.

Despite my efforts, I had failed to hold onto the moment.

I had let her slip through my skin.

It meant that I had to live with it now.

She had to face the reality that she was moving on in a city other than her own. Creating a life that was separate from my personal experience. She never made a passing moment with me.

And the worst part?

She didn't even know.

Uncovered that my entire being was hers.

Her presence was a source of longing that I couldn't articulate.

I would have tracked her down if she had asked or provided me with the slightest reason.

She had been my dwelling place.

I would sometimes imagine what it would have been like if I had only... spoken.

Suppose I had let out the words that night and given her even the slightest bit of my heart.

Would she have stayed?

Would she have gazed at me?

Would she have reached out to me, closed her eyes, and stated that she had been waiting for me to say it all along?

Had she not retreated, would she have exited?

Would she have given me that gentle, cautious stare - but it felt like a gradual rejection... and told me I'm not meant to be?

I didn't know. And I never would.

It was the most brutal part of it all.

The not knowing.

I was constantly haunted by the endless possibilities and how my thoughts turned into conflicts between peaceful optimism in the face of adversity.

Can hope be considered a valuable asset once hope is gone?

I tried to let go.

Made an effort to keep thinking about the reality of this.

She had a long road ahead of her in life.' She was entitled to pursue her dreams without any hindrance....

I was not meant to be involved in her life.

My heart was too strong to listen.

The pain in her body persisted, and I was unable to control it.

Every memory, every laugh, and almost everything seemed to be sacred. It held onto it all.

Despite my attempts to push it down and defy my urge to move on, I was still there. What happened?

I couldn't. I wouldn't.

Deep inside, I was aware of the truth..

Her actions had been successful for me.

She had been the one.

She was gone before I had the chance to reveal it to her.

I tried to distract myself.

Work was easy. I threw myself into it. Long hours, late nights - anything that might keep me busy.'

The scent from an edible treat, or a word in conversation that would make her smile.

I promised myself I would become accustomed.' The thought that I would eventually forget, the pain would dissipate, and life would resume its usual routine. But it never did.

This did not happen because I had a deep conviction that this would never be the same. She was the one who managed to escape, no matter how much I moved or what new distractions I found. The one I never told.

Every night, I remained staring out my window at the city and its bustling activity. People migrated, affection developed, and hearts disintegrated. There was always this one thought that kept running through my mind:.

I lost her.

She was living her life somewhere, and I couldn't even make a contact with her. I couldn't fix it. I couldn't go back.

Perhaps, somewhere within me, I was certain of the outcome. That it would hurt. The possibility of having an indefinite hole left by it would prevent me from achieving anything else.

I tried, but it didn't work. Not the interruptions, not the omnipresent bustle of my surroundings.

She was gone.

I was left with nothing but the memories. At the point when I was mine, she looked at me like I looked her, and we talked about our experiences, laughter, even sipping silences. I held onto those moments with desperation, as they were all I had left.

I wanted to reach out.

The plan was simple: send a message, make incoming call and listen to her. What positive outcomes could arise from its current use?

What could I say? Did I miss her for the entire time I was with her? I had no idea that she meant what to me?

The words are not changing anything, so there's no change. They wouldn't bring her back. My words, they wouldn't change them.

I had made my bed and then had to lie down.

I would never be able to move on from her.

I didn't want to, but not because I couldn't. My heart had already been shattered for her by now. No matter what took place, no matter how long it lasted, I would still hold love for her.

That was the most challenging aspect.

The knowing.

Her being was not the same as my love for her.

Despite the pain and silence, I would always hold onto that love. It could be anything I choose.

Chapter 21: Nikhat

It's unclear how long I can keep doing this. Every day, I feel like I'm a part of something unknown, and each one of them is more tired than the other. Despite my feet still being on solid ground here, there are moments when the ground seems to be moving and it feels like nothing is ever in equilibrium. This is frustrating. I desire the conviction that relocating to a new city and life will restore what has been damaged. This is the right decision for me. The expectation is that it'll aid in my ability to forget.

In my new apartment, I am left alone with the city lights on and off, but the silence is too much to bear. Why? Whether it's the freshness of everything or the weightlessness of all that has been lost, there are times when I just want to hang out by the ceiling and wonder if this is really happening. Why?

It seems like everything is going smoothly after a few weeks here. I've organized my workspace in the way I prefer, stocked my shelves with books I have been eager to read, and displayed pictures of places I've visited. My belongings are holding up against the walls, which makes them seem less exposed. Even with my best efforts to make it feel like home, I can't find any satisfaction.

There is still no sense of security for me.'

It's not because of the new city or the people I've encountered. Why? He is still on my mind, that's why.

Fateh.

It's crazy, right? Despite everything, he remains present, like an unending shadow. I departed because I was confident it would be less challenging. The reason: By putting some distance between us and running away, I believed I could escape the emotions he had caused me. It was possible for me to evade the constant pain that I felt in my chest, the one that always seemed to grow heavier when not present.

I have only carried it by myself, not through the mail.' The. As if the weight keeps getting heavier with every day, it reminds me of my past relationship with someone I didn't have.

There have been many nights without any clarity. Looking back and wondering where I should have gone wrong.. Did I not feel brave enough to reveal my emotions to him? Did I over wait? Was it because I didn't realize the significance of something until it was too late?

I don't know.

I have a feeling of missing him that I never thought possible. What does this mean?

It seemed like a different scenario to me once I moved. I assumed that the space would provide me with a chance to breathe and move past negative thoughts. It has only caused me to question everything. Work has taken up most of my time. I experience doubt when the work day comes to an end, leaving me with only the calmness of my apartment. I'm pondering whether that was the appropriate decision to make.

Leaving would be premature, as it was too early to leave everything. From him.

God bless, I long to forget about him and our relationship. But I can't.

My actions are a result of my own conscious decision to make them worse. Similar to when I use social media to look up information about him. I'm not even in the physical world of seeing him. It's not within my rights to call him. I am unable to make him comprehend my feelings. The thoughts that have been bothering me for months.'

I'm unable to come to terms with the fact.

I'm constantly questioning whether he's been disregarded. What should I do? Maybe he's moved on. I think he has forgotten me. Although it's a painful experience, acknowledging that I've spent countless hours and months seeking closure from someone who could have brought me back together is incredibly easy.

Still, in a city I have little familiarity with, I find myself alone and haunted by his memories. I am still hopeful that he will get in touch with him, regardless of the timeframe. He may return to his soft eyes in the future, bringing back memories of not being able to see me with him anymore. I anticipate him to inquire about my condition and how life is treating me in this location where everything seems a little off. ".

Waiting is something I keep to myself. I'm not hoping for that. But I am. Despite knowing that it's not my best option, I still find myself waiting. What is the hardest part?

But I can't help it. My thoughts are always, there's a possibility that he'll get in touch. Perhaps he will acknowledge the authenticity of our relationship. He may be able to comprehend that my departure was due to my inability to remain where I was meant to go and my unresolved feelings for him.

There is a chance that he will pursue me. If he comes, we'll work out the matter with him. We'll fix the issues, and I won't be as lost as I was. Thank you.

Despite my belief in its reality, I am aware that it is a fantasy. An unachievable dream that will never be realized. Despite my repeated affirmations, I am aware that it is not him who will initiate contact. Why? It's me.

Taking that initial step is my responsibility.

The question remains whether I am capable of doing it or not. Whether or not I have the courage to call and reopen the door that I swiftly shut after leaving is unclear. What if it's too late? Is there any chance that he's already moved on or found another partner to fill my empty space?

What if his feelings towards me are not what he once wanted?

It makes me feel sick to my stomach.

The inside of me feels like a knot, gripping against everything until I'm unable to breathe.

I can't go back. Not like this. Re-entering his life with a sense of expectation and hopelessness to feel like I never left and have everything functioning properly is not acceptable.

I am uncertain if I can resolve this issue.

I acknowledge that I must leave this limbo unfinished. Despite the situation being out of the ordinary, I can't continue to pretend that it's not happening.

I need to know.

Can we expect a chance outcome? In the event that this is fixed.'

Possibly, that means it's my responsibility to reach out.

Might it be the case that he's no longer interested? Is it possible that his feelings have faded over time? Is there any chance that he misses someone despite being close to him?

I am left with a series of questions to ask. How is this? There is something about me that elicits thoughts of insecurity and optimism, but ultimately fails to provide a concrete response.

If I could call, it would be nice to do so. My desire is to express my longing for him. I wish I could inquire whether he has considered me or not.

But I can't. Not yet.

My uncertainty grips me like a second skin, and it won't dissipate until I find. I feel better now...

Perhaps my fear of being vulnerable is the reason behind it. If I allow myself to be open with him, he will realize that I care about him.

I am apprehensive about continuing to experience this same longing and pain that never ceases.

It seems like everything will turn out better for me. The thought of him will eventually fade away from my thoughts, but this is just a temporary phase. Despite everything, I am aware of the truth.

Can I ever let go of him? I've only wanted him in certain situations. Not at the moment.

He's all I have.

Chapter 22: Fateh

I can't breathe.

It's like a wave, the thought crashes over me." I stand at the edge of my bed and watch as a mobile phone rings, shakes to let me know if it still exists. » Still thinking about me. But it doesn't. It's silent. Just like everything else. The silence is unbearable. It gripes me tightly, envelopes my body, and pulls on me.

I've been waiting. For what, I don't know. For her to reach out? Would she have any comments to make? I'm not sure why she would. The reason I've been tempted into thinking that she might call me is unclear. Maybe she's waiting for me to take action, but I don't think that either of us is ready. What if I'm too late? What if she's moved on?

Might it be possible that I've lost her for good?

I can't do this. My constant screams of hope and anticipation, checking my phone every few minutes, but no response. It's driving me insane. My mind is pounding with thoughts of her, the possibilities we have together and the things that are just too easy for me to forget.

I rise, wandering around the room, attempting to avoid distraction." I can't sit still. I can't focus on anything. Her is the only thing on my mind. She has been absent for several weeks. It has been weeks since I last saw her, had a look on her face, heard her laugh and felt like she was here with me. But it's just like yesterday. Despite being out of reach, she is still present here.

My goal has always been to move on from this situation. I've been trying to keep myself busy by engaging in

activities like work, playing with friends or anything else. But it doesn't work. It never works. Whenever I'm alone, everything in the world comes to an abrupt halt. The size of everything I said. Everything I should've said.

The truth is, I'm overwhelmed with guilt.

If only I had spoken to them that night.' Had I been brave enough to reveal my feelings to her, what would have happened? If only I had disclosed to her what was on my heart. Then it is possible that something different occurred.' Maybe she wouldn't have left.

But I didn't. Now I have to deal with that.'"

Every second, minute, and hour, it's a reminder of how badly I failed.

I should have communicated my feelings of love to her.

That's the truth, isn't it? I loved her. I have loved her deeply, but I never expressed it. There was no justification given by me for her to stay. I was too scared, uncertain, and apprehensive to ruin everything. And now? I won't be able to disclose it to her. Thank goodness.

I comb through my hair with my hand, feeling frustrated. I'm unable to scream. Why? My anger is consuming me, but I'm struggling to let go. What can I do? There's no outlet. I am unable to communicate with anyone. No one who would understand. She means so much to me, and I've been holding on to her memory for as long as I can remember.

She's my lifeline.

That's the truth. My understanding is entirely based on her. Only one thing that has ever felt authentic.' I'm struggling to cope without her, questioning if I can ever breathe again.

Putting my phone on the bedside, I try not to think about trying calling her first, texting her instead. But I can't. I can't be that guy. She left without me being her chasing her, not even after saying goodbye. When she departed, it seemed like everything we had been saying was meaningless.

But that's a lie. It means everything.

She means everything.

The window is my destination as I gaze at the night sky.' I can't see any of the city lights below, and I wonder if she's simply gazing at the same sky and thinking about the exact same things. Is she neglecting me? Is it true that she has already moved on, creating a life without me? The thought makes my chest feel tighter.'"'. Caused me to experience nausea.'

I can't let her go. I won't.

Can you suggest ways to resolve this issue? What steps can I take to fix my broken things? Requesting Professional.

It seems like my mind is spiraling out of control. My mind is consumed with regret and I am unable to make any conscious decisions about my actions. What would happen if I had just finished conversing with someone? Suppose I had spoken everything in the right context, what would be the outcome? Suppose I had expressed my admiration for her, what could have happened? Was it common for her to make me wake up every morning? What was the reason for my unrequited love?

My mind is occupied as I place my hands over my face. The memories come flooding back, one after the other.

Her laugh. Her eyes. She seemed to grasp my thoughts and feelings in a way that others couldn't.

I should've said something.

When things weren't going my way, I should have waited until now. What happened? Then I should have told her I loved her.' That I always have. But I didn't. It's time for me to move on from the pain.

Breathing becomes more challenging as I spend time here. Accepting that she's not present becomes more difficult. She's gone. My mind is consumed by regret and a broken record that keeps coming back.

Getting back to my seat, I wander around the room without any movement. The silence is deafening. There's no way for me to resolve this issue. I have no idea what to do. I desire to revisit that night and when things were still simple.

For instances when I had the opportunity.'

Then I should have told her I loved her.

It seems like it's too late for me to be concerned.

I halt my pace and glance at my phone again.'". There's still nothing. No messages. No calls. Nothing.

My presence is obstructive to her. She seems to have moved on, and I'm still here, trapped in this moment. ".

I glance at my phone for a few minutes.?... Would it be appropriate to send her a text message? What if I were to say anything? Is it okay to tell her that I miss her? Has it become a daily occurrence for me to think about her after she leaves? How can I handle this without her being there for me?

But no. I can't. I won't. I've already waited too long. What if she refuses to hear back from me? Request. Is it possible that I am now just a distant memory of someone she loved but has since forgotten?

That repulsion makes me feel terrible. I have no idea how to handle it.

I can't just pretend everything is okay. My actions are inconsistent when I think my life is okay. But I am clueless as to how it can be resolved.

I can't fix this.

I glance at the phone again, and now I'm uncertain of what comes next. While looking at the screen, I use my index finger to pause and consider whether I should call her. Why? Just hear her voice. Be aware that she is still present.

But I don't.

I don't call. I don't text.

Rather than doing anything, I just lay down the phone and close my eyes while reclined on the bed. I'm eager to shout, but my emotions are not in alignment. Despite my desire to cry, I won't allow myself to stop.

The thought of her returning is all I can think about, lost in the sea of emotions.' Sitting here. Wondering if I will ever tell her the truth.

But maybe it's too late. Maybe she's already moved on.

I'll have to live with it if she has.

I'm trying to be okay. In reality, I am not.

She was my lifeline.

Chapter 23: Fateh

It's been weeks, maybe months.

It's like a blur where you wait for something, and time just seems to blend in. It feels like you're waiting in agony, hoping for something that seems unattainable. Why? But then, it does.

The thing you've been hoping for. It's something you've told yourself it won't happen.. It arrives. And suddenly, the world shifts. Everything that felt like it was weighing down your life becomes lighter. You breathe again.

I'm seated at my desk when it takes place. After a brief moment of inactivity, I watch the phone flash in the dark room. The name flashes on the screen, causing me to feel overwhelmed.

Nikhat.

My heart crashes into my throat for the first time in a prolonged period. Body heat, unsure of whether to believe it or not, uncertain if it's her, doubtful that I'm dreaming this moment. Because it feels too surreal.

But the name stays there. It's real. It's her. And I can't breathe. My response is unclear.. I've spent a lot of time contemplating this moment, replaying every possible scenario, and reflecting on my words when she finally called, phoned, or returned. But it's happening now and I'm paralyzed.

I feel like the words have vanished from my thoughts, leaving behind everything I had wished to say and what I should have said is now in an unsettling state. How can I make the most of this moment? How should I respond to

her after everything? (See details below) After the silence?
After the distance?

A frozen hand grips the phone beneath me. My speech and movement abilities have disappeared. Why does this happen? Afterward, I precisely press my finger onto the screen.

Her name is still glowing on the phone.. Trying to swallow my food, I swallow with great effort. I open the message.

"Fateh..." is a word that's both powerful and unsettling.

For a brief moment, I gaze at it with the word in my mind. The pain I've been carrying recursively as my chest tightens. It seems to be returning in quick succession.

I'm overwhelmed. I've wanted this. This moment has waited my turn for her to come back and maybe even care. Her presence and communication have left me unsure of what to say.

My fingers tremble as I take out my breath and begin typing. My wish is to provide a complete statement, but there's no way to do so. It seems like I can't go into detail about everything that has affected me with this little message. Why? In what manner can I convey my longings for her?. Is it possible to feel alive without the presence of my mother? How much regrettable do I have for not using the words that could have impacted my life?

I opt for something uncomplicated and protected, rather than something else.

"I'm here.

I've been waiting."

I experience a surge of relief as soon as I send it.' But it soon becomes anxiety. What will she say next? Is she willing to

be seen as a stranger? She'll either inform me of all her thoughts or just let them go and shut off?

I'm currently gazing at the screen whenever she replies.

"I'm sorry, Fateh.

It's been a long time coming but I've been thinking about it. My mind has been preoccupied with everything, and I'm beginning to realize that I should have spoken sooner. I didn't mean to cause you any pain. That was not my intention to depart.

The words hit me hard. She's apologizing? For what? It's impossible for me to make her understand. I didn't inquire if she had left or departed. Here she is, saying a sorry?... I didn't expect that. Those words were unexpected to me.

The remorse starts to creep in me. Perhaps my mistake was inducing too much information about her. I should have been more patient and understood.". I should have contacted earlier. What if it was too late?'. If I had not gotten what I wanted, what would be the outcome?

My fingers shake as I type away..

"You have been received with open arms by me.

It was my wish to avoid ending things in that manner. I've been... lost without you.".

I can't help it. The words are unfiltered and freely flowing. Holding back no longer matters. I am indifferent to the fear and uncertainty.' I'm taking advantage of this opportunity.

With my heart racing, I whisper "I miss you.".

She responds within moments. Why?

"I miss you too, Fateh.

But I was scared. The fear of what we were becoming made me unsure of how to proceed.' If they had been given the. Maybe the solution was to run away, I thought. Even so, I am aware of a mistake I made. I'm done with running. Why? My intention is not to hide our situation.'".

My pain has been eased by her words, and they are like a healing balm for me. I have no idea how to reply to that. I can't help but wonder if she ever thought about me and how she missed me, all the while. Why do I still have to think about her? She has come to me, stating that she feels the same way.

Without asking difficult questions, I cannot simply retreat into the past. I don't believe that everything will be alright once we restart. The combination of our experiences has left me questioning whether she's truly prepared. I can't shake this question.

"I'm not inclined to hide either," I say. "But I want to be sure if this is true?".

Do you think I'm being too simplistic by expressing my desire to hear something? It's necessary for us to be fully involved if we want to do this, Nikhat. I can't do this halfway.".

I am eagerly anticipating her response, my heart stooped. This is it. This is the moment that will set everything straight. Will she choose me? Will she choose us?

Upon hearing her message, it's uncomplicated and effortless, but I feel like my weight is lifting off my shoulders.

"I'm all in, Fateh.

I've always been.".

The relief is almost overwhelming. I am uncertain about whether to laugh or cry. After a prolonged breath, I can finally exhale. She's here. She's really here. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I can breathe again as she starts to talk to me.'

The words "Nikhat, aren't you alone," appear in my mind as I type and shiver with emotion. "We're all together, isn'T?".

Always."

The subsequent seconds are a blur. She responds quickly, and we start a long conversation that is more genuine than the last one.? The distance, silence, and regrets we share are all discussed. Why? Our discussions center on our aspirations, learnings from history, and determination to achieve them.

By the close of night, I have a realization: this is what it was. There is a possibility of new and better things to come. Then we're not going back to where it was. We're starting fresh. I'm prepared to take on the challenge.

Close my eyes, leaning back in my chair and letting the weight of everything fall on me. I am back in a conversation with Nikhat. Our honesty has become a part of our interactions. It's been a while, but now I feel like I have found my way back to her.

She reached out to me. And I won't let her go any longer.'

I could not breathe. I was overwhelmed by the impact of Nikhat's words.... It was a long time coming for me to know if this day would ever come. Should we ever break our silence? While in my apartment, I read her messages repeatedly, trying to convince myself it was a genuine message. The feeling was excessively surreal, as if I were still in a dream and waiting for it to break out.

But it was real. She was back. Nikhat had reached out after a considerable distance, even after all this time.

She wasn't the only one to have sent a text or responded with merely "Hello.". She had shared herself. She had poured her heart, thoughts and feelings into the situation. For the first time in my life, I could perceive the holes in myself's defenses.

The idea of Nikhat returning was never on my mind. It seemed to me that I had lost her forever. No, really. I had agreed to the vast and chilly distance that separated us. ". Despite the fact that it consumed my thoughts every day, I had to deal with the silence. But now, here she was. Trying to bridge the gap. Trying to fight for us.

The task at hand was beyond my understanding. It didn't make sense for me to think about renouncing it. Many things had slipped my mind during our conversation. Countless repentance letters that I had kept hidden due to my fear of confessing how much I hurt her. But I had to. She deserved that. I owed her that.

Her message, I read it again and my eyes stayed on the screen. She declared that she was not angry.. Nonetheless, there was another aspect. Something more complicated. She had been hurt. Deeply. Even though I had the desire for this moment and heard from her, the weight of our past still weighed heavily on me, unresolved.

I struggled to find the appropriate way to reply. I couldn't just tell her that she missed me and felt remorseful for how things had turned out. No. This wasn't about me. Our conversation revolved around me failing her. The way I had managed to let her go without any intervention, and without forcing her into it.

As the headache started to pile up, I pressed my fingers against my temples to alleviate the pain. The feeling was intense. I couldn't handle this—not yet. I needed time. Now it's time to forget everything she had given me. It's time to find out how I can apologize for my actions and convey my feelings.

My thoughts were consumed by the words that I could not express, as if they were stuck in my head for life. Is there a way for me to convey to her that my decision to let her go was based on my inability to fight for her? How can I clarify that in my thoughts, I believed she required space and that releasing her was the right decision for us?

My God, I was a total idiot.

I jumped when my phone buzzed once more. Yet another message was sent by Nikhat.

I breathed deeply before opening it, ready to face the consequences.. She had expressed vulnerability, and I was at a loss for how to react. What was she hoping for from me? What was my correct response?

The impact of her words was greater than my expectations....

She expressed that I should have fought for her. She relied on me to demonstrate my concern and encourage her to come back. If I had only been more capable and devoted to her, things could have turned out differently.

Despite the emotional impact of hearing that, I was convinced she was correct. I had let her down. Due to my intense fear of losing her, I never gave us the opportunity to fight. I was occupied with the task of protecting myself from her leaving.' And I was the one who had to make that choice.'".

The weight of her words was overwhelming to me.

All I wanted to do during that time was express my regret for not standing up as her defender.' How I wish I could be the man she wanted. The extent of my pain when she departed.'...

However, I wasn't sure if saying that was satisfactory. I was unsure if she would ever forgive me for not having let her go so easily. I was unsure if she still had a desire to let me back inside.

My phone buzzed again. It was Nikhat.

I felt my heart racing on the screen when I saw her name flash across it. Her message left me breathless.

"Fateh, you hurt me.

Your support was necessary for my fight, but you didn't. You ceased my speech without any response.

I was sharpened by the words, piercing me with every blade. She was right. I had hurt her. Despite my efforts, I had let her go and I thought she would be fine with me. But what about me? What happened to the part of me that was left unoccupied by her?

She was unmovable from my grasp again. Not like this. Not after everything we had shared.

"I wrote a response, my hands shaking as I tried to compose myself." "Nikhat, I'm feeling guilty." It was necessary for me to fight on your behalf. I regret not fighting for us.' The. I believed that my actions were the best, but I was not. What happened? My heartfelt appreciation for you was the reason why I let you go. You deserve better.

Sending her an email sent my heart racing as I waited for confirmation. I had doubts about whether or not this would

resolve everything. It was a very simple question. The idea of this being adequate was beyond my comprehension. But I had to try. I needed to convey to her that I was present at the moment. I longed to be there for her and make things right.'

Following minutes were almost like an eternity. I felt a strong sense of anticipation in my apartment. As I waited for her response, my thoughts were consumed with the events that unfolded between us. I questioned whether I had prolonged my presence before telling her.

I couldn't fix the past. I am capable of fighting for our cause now.' I could assure her that I was willing to give everything.'

The phone buzzed again.

I requested to meet her, but she asked.

I smiled for the first time in a long time.... There was hope. We had a possibility.'".

"Well, of course." I said. "I'll do what I have.".

Chapter 24: Nikhat

Keeping things inside has always been a part of me. Who pretends to be okay, even when my heart is in a thousand pieces. Perhaps I was unable to articulate my emotions effectively. Why? (Laughter) Perhaps I was afraid of being vulnerable, feeling embarrassed about the impact my lack of vulnerability could have on others.

While perusing Fateh's final message on my phone, I cannot ignore the fact that everything has changed. This is how I feel right now. Our relationship has changed significantly, and I'm unsure of what to do next. It's not the joyful reunion I expected.. It's not quite the same connection I imagined in my dreams. This... this is complicated.

There are still many unspoken words from Fateh in the air between us.

"I'm all in, Fateh.

I've always been."

His statement about that should have given me the necessary sense of relief. I should have been able to feel secure and confident that everything would be fine. I am constantly reminiscing about what has transpired.' In regards to the unresolved matter. The silence. The distance. When I departed, Fateh didn't offer any words. He mercilessly released me.

I close my eyes, leaning against the back of the couch.. I'm here, finally. Fateh returned after a long absence.? There he is, calling me and saying "I'm waiting". However, there is a desire within me to do more.

I need more.

He has to speak the things that hurt me. He has to be informed of my departure. Why? Why I had to leave. Regardless of how much I miss him or care for him, there's still something that will stay with me. It seems like I'm still a person without my own identity. The part of me that still questions whether Fateh truly comprehends the extent of his pain.

The amount of pain I felt when I left him.'

It was heartbreaking to have to leave him behind, even though my heart felt broken every second.

He needs to be aware of that. For as long as I've been struggling with it, I rely on him to understand the extent of my pain.

I feel a sensation in my chest the following morning, after spending hours conversing, re-enacting and meditating on the past with great care. It's time. We should be honest with him. I need to reveal all the things I've kept within him.

I'll make this right. I need him to come and see me first. To hear me. To understand me.

My feet make me run around in the room. Even though we're facing direct sunlight, the temperature is not yet a concern due to low humidity. I don't feel like it's shining on me as I should. I need something to do. My heart's racing. The words are all over my head, and I can't seem to shake them off. They must be communicated to me without any hesitation.' This needs to be heard by Fateh....

Despite my fingers being moving quickly, I am typing on my phone without any apparent reason to think.

"I'm not sure how to do this, dearest."

But there's one thing you should know. Something you need to hear."

The screen grabs my attention for a few seconds, as I reflect on my words. I am aware that this is the moment. The moment I've been dreading. The point at which I've been struggling to face reality for an extended period. Upon stopping, I simply press send.

Those moments of duration are like hours of time. I sense a surge of anticipation inside. My heart beats fast as I move around the room. Why do I keep moving? What if he doesn't understand? Might he perceive me as being overly sensitive or difficult? What could be the possible explanation?

Currently, I am incapable of returning to my previous state. I've already opened this door. There's no going back.

Eventually, my phone rings, and I almost fall over. And I grab it with both hands, my heart racing.

"What's your current mental activity, Nikhat?"

"I'm listening. You have my full attention."

His words leave a lasting impression on me, as I blink in amazement. There's sincerity in them. There's an openness. This is the response I was hoping for, the kind of answer I needed. Yet, it doesn't make my words more straightforward.

Prior to typing, I catch my breath.

"You hurt me, Fateh.

I'm not angry at you. You caused me pain when you didn't intervene. When you didn't stop me. I'll leave when you do.... You were necessary for me, but you didn't come to mind. It was necessary for you to come and fight for me. But you didn't."

The screen catches my gaze as I feel like every word has been lifted from my consciousness. Why? This is something I wasn't comfortable saying beforehand. I was unable to express my thoughts in words. But now, I've to. If I want to give this another shot, he must be aware of the extent of pain. How much silence shattered my heart.

I wait for him to reply, my heart racing. After reading his message, I open it with a shaken hand.

"I was unsure of what to do, Nikhat.

I was clueless about how to keep you there. I didn't know how to fight for you because I believed you wouldn't. I thought you needed a break, need time to yourself.' You were beyond my ability to stop. I should have. I should've fought for us. Nonetheless, I believed I was giving you what you wanted.

Despite his apology, it doesn't seem like enough. Not yet. I need more from him. I must ask him to comprehend why I went. Why does it hurt to have such a strong sense of pain?

"You should have fought," I respond. "I was made to stay."

You had to make a strong argument for me to stay where you were. You were required by me to provide evidence that our struggle was worth fighting for.

I pause briefly, looking at the screen. This is it. For a considerable time, I have been holding onto this unfiltered truth. Fateh is currently catching a glimpse of it. I just hope it's enough.

Fateh and I are texting back and forth, discussing the raw truths we've been avoiding for some time. There's no pretending anymore. Let's stop hiding the truth about our shared emotions.

My chest holds the feeling of anticipation, doubtfulness, anxiety, and the potential for unexpected things. Something better.

The conclusion of the night conversation makes me aware that we're finally on equal terms. Our understanding of each other has been matched by our previous knowledge. Our relationship has been a source of pain for each other, but we're finally getting some closure. It's possible that we could need just that.

I am now in a different place because of the silence between Fateh and me. It has a soft, more honest quality that is slowly lifting the heavy and assuaging tension."'. We've spoken the necessary things, and I'm not running away from the truth for the first time in a long time. Why? Neither of us is.

As I reclined on my bed, the city's gentle noise trickled through the window. The night feels serene, as if the world is finally taking notice.' Something unexpectedly loosens in my chest, and it's now a new weight. It's not just hope, it'll be empathy.". A consensus that, for the first time, doesn't necessitate any explanations. The response, openness, and listening are all signs of something new. I didn't have a clear idea until tonight.

But it's not enough yet. Not for me.

Because tomorrow is Fateh's birthday. Although we have made significant progress, my ultimate goal is to demonstrate to him that this is important to us as a team. It's worth fighting for. The years, the distance, and the misunderstandings have not diminished my desire for him in my life. I have always harbored a longing for him.

I've expressed my emotions through these late-night messages, but something still feels a bit lacking. The reason

may be that words have a limited reach. Showing up is what makes it all the difference in actions. It's important for me to convey to him his deep emotional attachment.

But I'm on a train now. I acknowledge the peril and realize that I'm not equipped to make significant contributions. Why? Yet I am aware of how to make it come into existence, and this is what I know.

I'll surprise him.

An elaborate plan or fancy dinner isn't necessary for me. I don't need grand declarations. I just have to come in person and remind him of everything we've been through.". Of everything we can be.

As a result, I initiate planning. I take out my phone and go through some search results on my device. If I leave tomorrow early, it'll be just in time for his birthday and by the time he gets home from work, I can reach his apartment.

My list of desires includes a cake, small yet meaningful items, and some minor touches that honor the memories and unwritten notes we shared. I also prioritize specifics for each item in my wish list.

The first step causes me to feel ecstatic. This action from Fateh has been impulsive and emotionally driven for some time, but I'm finally committed to it because I know what makes this situation acceptable. What we both need.

It's the most truthful statement I've made in a long time. The sensation in my chest is a result of me looking at the screen for ten seconds. It's just the first step towards something new for us. We've both endured a great deal, but tomorrow, I'm going to prove to Fateh that we still have room for improvement.

Chapter 25: Nikhat

The following morning, I feel a strange sense of purpose. Although it's early, the plan I've decided is already making me anxious. I am unable to concentrate on anything else. Every aspect of this day, from the cake to the thoughtful present I chose, to all the little gifts that were included.

I start by getting ready. There's an air of expectation that I can't shake off. For the first time in a long time, I have done this action out of feeling pleased. Because Fateh deserves this. Despite all the confusion and distance, he should be aware of my long-standing desire for him. Despite the pain I've experienced, I am still present. That he's still my home.

I reach for my belongings, which include my purse, the small bag containing the present, and the cake that has been carefully wrapped to endure the journey. Thank you very much! It's simple, but it's mine. My small, imperfect offering. But I hope it's enough.

I catch my breath before leaving the house.. There's no turning back now. The beating heart and shaky hands make me feel uncomfortable, yet I remain indifferent. What could be the reason for this? This is what I want. It's how I want to make things right here.

The thought of what can be done in the cab fills me with excitement. What will Fateh think? How will he react when interacting with me? If I've misunderstood the situation, what should be my next move? Is there a chance that he's not prepared for this to happen to me?

I shiver in thought, trying not to worry. There's no room for second-guessing. It's my verdict, and I'm sticking with

it. I have to tell him he's still the one I love. Regardless, I am prepared to stand up for us. I aim to demonstrate that we can overcome the difficult issues in a collective manner.

It feels like an extended cab ride. I ponder the city's passing, with the streets I was familiar with falling into a state of disrepair. The minutes seem to last forever.?...

Eventually, I'm outside his dwelling. Why? I exit the cab, my hands clasping the small bag with the gift and cake. I take a few deep breaths to settle myself, trying to soothe my nerves. This is it.

Prior to I can make up my mind, I approach his doorstep. I don't knock yet. I sit there for a moment, and everything just falls into place inside me. » There are only a few notes of activity inside. There is a sense that the world has diminished to this point, when everything could be different.

I press the doorbell.

The sound of his footsteps towards the door causes my heart to break down....

This is it. It's the moment I've been waiting for.

Everything freezes for a moment as the door opens with glee.

In the doorway, Fateh stands like a familiar face, with his hair slightly frizzy and shirt crumpled from sexy activities, but his eyes are wide open and filled by an odd mist. It's all good. Something I can't quite place. Although he's taken aback, there'd be more to it than that. His lips appear to be engaged in conversation, but there are no words spoken.

I sense a receding of time.

What actions should I take at this point in time?' With the sense of emptiness that fills me with my own familiarity, I feel like we were once part of the same person. When we were still so distinct from each other. When could I be certain of the time I spent with him.'

But this is different now. I am uncertain about what to anticipate.' My thoughts are clouded by his words.

Instead, I take a deep breath and step forward, pushing myself to break free from the silence that feels so heavy on my spirit.

I say, "Happy birthday handsome!" Despite the overwhelming emotions swirling inside me, my voice remains steady.

With a smile on my face, I bring the small bag with me.

His expression changes, transitioning from shock to a gentler tone. His eyes glaze over as he looks at the bag, then turn back towards me and still blink.

"Let me take this before I abandon everything else."

With a low voice, I could tell you were here not just in the dream state.

My chest becomes tighter as I push down a knot. I'm not here to apologize or clarify what's happened. What can I say? I'm here to do something.' Despite the distance and silence, it's important to demonstrate that there is something worth fighting for.

"I'm here, Fateh." I whisper in my ear as I open the bag to him. "Happy birthday!"

You were not going to spend it alone because I didn't want you to.

He looks down at the bag, and I can see him fighting with himself, wondering why he's here. With his eyebrow raised, he steps back and allows me to enter.'

"I wasn't the only one with me." He seems skeptical.

The familiar scent of his apartment fills me with a sense of nostalgia. Why do I feel this way? The minor adjustments, such as the mugs on the kitchen counter and bookcase by the couch, seem to have disappeared completely in my memory. Why?

But, what happened? What happened now and never before? Back into the room, I offer the bag to him again, still holding my hand.

I am the one who takes the bag from Fateh, his fingers rubbing it against mine in a slow motion. Despite the briefness of the touch, I feel something. It's an unknown fact, but it'll be apparent.

I witness a change in the direction of something behind where his eyes meet mine again. Something guarded, something unsure. But there's a deeper, almost identical, hope.

After some time, he speaks with a heavy voice. "What's your reason for being here? ". Why now? ".

I inhale deeply, trying not to become irate. I desire to communicate with him and convey that this is my sentiment, which is that I have come to terms with everything.' I've come to realize what I have been avoiding for so long. "...

But I don't say it. Not yet.

"Just wanted to see you" I admit, stepping into the room slowly, Fateh.I missed you so much.?

His expression fades, as if my words have taken his mind off him. He's making a mental leap towards me, and I know he'll be trying to decipher my thoughts. I don't blame him. If I were him, my confusion would be a result of our shared experiences.".

But I'm here now. And that's what matters.

His voice is more vulnerable than mine as he finally says, "I didn't think you were going to come." He adds, feeling sorry for his feelings.

These words landed me like a punch on the chest. I've been pondering over whether Fateh or not missed me, but his words bring out all the unresolved emotions.

I approach him, trying to keep my cool, but the intensity of love runs high inside me. It's hard to shake up with this kind of affection. The need to convey to him that there is still something to be gained from our time together is almost too much to bear.

"You haven't lost me yet," I whisper, my voice clear and full of meaning.

My comprehension of them is still nascent. But that doesn't mean you haven't lost me. It never did."

Fateh begins with silence. He maintains a sharp gaze towards me, as if he's trying to penetrate the walls I've constructed around himself. There is no reason to blame him for that. The walls I've constructed are tall to prevent myself from falling for someone who may not feel the same way. Why?

I acknowledge that I've been the one stalling our progress. I've been the one who has doubted reality..

After breathing deeply, Fateh's voice becomes lower when he speaks again and feels like confession. "Nikhat, I thought

of you every day.". Since your departure, every day. I was unsure if I would ever come across you again.

He wraps his words around me like a blanket, hugging me with something I didn't know I needed. The doubts and uncertainties I've held onto over the past few months fade away, replaced by something more transparent. Something simple.

He doesn't retreat as I approach him. He touches mine, I grab his hand and momentarily pause. The relief is streaming down my face as his fingers crinkle around mine. This is not a matter of using words. Not right now.

Fateh, "I apologize and my voice trembles slightly." I exclaimed. "For everything."

For not seeing it sooner. For allowing confusion and fear to get the best of them.

Looking down, he has his soft eyes. "No need to say sorry." He nodded in agreement and smiled. I get it now. I understand why you left. I've been where you were. I've been afraid of... this. Don't care how much you mean to me."

I nod and swallow the lump in my throat. Understanding the reason for our presence is now more straightforward. To realize we've both felt scared. But we're here, together, now. I am aware that's the most significant aspect.

"Fateh, I never wanted to leave you. I miss you so much," I whisper in my ear.

I believed that it was necessary.

With a smile on his face, he rubs his thumb against my hand and says, "Nikhat, I'm okay with leaving you.". If you choose not to, it's unlikely.

Afterward, I feel an internal force tug at my core.

The world seems to fade away as we stand there for a moment, with only ourselves present.'

Chapter 26: Fateh

I was dreaming. I had to be.

I never expected to see Nikhat holding gift bags and balloons at my doorstep at midnight, as if she was here with me.

Like she had never left.

I had not yet adjusted, had difficulty moving, speaking, or breathing properly. I couldn't help but feel my heart ache as she stood there, smiling and her eyes twinkled with relief.

With her voice softer than ever, she said happy birthday to us, feeling the spirit of the night.

I blinked. Once. Twice. After that, she threw a ridiculously large gift bag into my hand and said, "Take this before I throw everything." This helped me get out of my head. And I came out and let her get away like she'd done a hundred times before, pushing inside like that.". She had never been absent. But she had been gone.

I had been attempting to overlook the empty space she had left, and to push away the intense yearning to hear her voice, see her face, or be with her for months. In my living room, she was surrounded by birthday decorations that she had brought along, and she seemed to have something to say but didn't know how to do it. Her presence had become too much to handle, but then I heard a familiar noise from behind me as I quietly whined.

Bruno.

Perhaps partially asleep, he was lying in his usual spot by the couchside. As if to feel the movement of air, he crossed

paths with happiness as a long-sleeping Nikhat placed his hands on his. She cracked a small, unsteady smile and bent over to scratch behind his ears. "Good morning," she whispered softly in reply. Bruno hollered before hitting his big warm head against her palm with affection. I ingested the lump in my throat, watching as he leaned into her touch like a long-time waiter for her. Just like I had.

I observed Nikhat, her fingers still ensnared in Bruno's skin, with her eyes emitting light with an unknown element.

"I'm here, Fateh."

I couldn't determine whether it was the best or worst form of torture.

As I sat with the bag in my hands, I gazed at the other items she had brought. "Kikhat," I murmured deeply and her expression was unclear. "What are you up to?" She asked calmly before smiling again. Spending it alone was not something you wanted to do.

My throat was tightly closed as I swallowed. "I didn't happen alone." What followed?

Her eyebrows were raised and her eyes flicked to the empty, serene apartment behind me. She gave an awkward response, saying "It's okay."

I rubbed my face with my breath, the back of my head involuntarily. "That's not what I was trying to express."

She maintained her soft smile and displayed another bag with a small smile. "Appears to be serious, do you want to see what they have for me?"

I didn't care about gifts. I didn't care about birthdays. My concern was over her presence, and I had no idea if it would persist or end when she vanished.

But I nodded anyway.

I noticed her sitting on my couch, making herself comfortable and starting to take things out one by one. She did it slowly. A new watch is a waste of time when you can easily replace your old one due to scratches. Why? "It could be that your most enjoyable time is now," she said, reminiscing about how important she was. She knew I wanted to buy new gym shoes, but she said that even though they were busy, she still had time and bought a ridiculously soft hoodie. Her eyes met my gaze as she watched her with indifference for not hearing or breathing any sound. Afterward, she unwrapped a small box and held it up for half an hour before giving it to me with both hands.

She mused, "You have to admire this one."

After opening it slowly, I felt the weight of her words begin to settle over me. A silver keychain with a delicate engraving on it read:

The boy who saves everyone should also save you, not yourself.

While staring, my fingers brushed against the metal, I sensed a tightening and twisting feeling in my chest.

"Nikhat..."

She moved, unpredictably fidgety. "I just know it's been tough for you."... more... I am aware that you don't speak up about it. But you should. You can."

Her voice was silent, but it had an unmistakable quality that made me want to believe her. I was unsure of my abilities. Then I stooped over and put the keychain into my pocket, holding it tightly like something to hold.

Holding a breath, squeezing her hands, and smiling again. "Alright, good." Birthday boy, what's the plan?"

I blinked. "Plan?"

"Yes.

Your birthday. What are your goals?

I didn't know. It wasn't something I had considered.

She tilted her head slightly and noticed a familiar scent in her eyes. "Stuck, though." for utterance. I've an idea."

"That's not a good thing," I said, raising my eyebrow.

Nikhat smiled and walked past me into the apartment, as if she were in charge of the place. She positioned the bags, unzipping one of them.' She brought out a cupcake with ice and icing, featuring melted chocolate and an unlit candle in the center, before I could ask what she was up to. It was incredibly simple.

Did she think I might forget the cake?

I felt a pull in my chest. "You brought ten parties," I said instead.

She presented the cupcake to me and then unlatched a lighter. She was surrounded by the flickering of a small flame between us. "Wish for something." I said quietly.

Still, I blew the candle away while keeping my eyes shut.
(Laughs)

We were left with only the sound of night air, Bruno's gentle breathing at our feet. Afterward, Nikhat shook her hand in celebration. "Ah, it's your birthday.". We're not done yet."

I widened my eyes. "What the hell am I doing there?"

She grasped my wrist and pulled me towards the kitchen with a playful expression. "You'll see."

Bruno furiously padded towards her, anticipating that she had won and was about to make a comeback. In a backward posture she flapped her breasts, whispering in his direction. I had to turn my back and away from the sight because it was so easy, that it felt so natural.

After assisting her with some water, I said to myself, "Shut up," and headed towards the fridge. "You entered at midnight; all I have to do is make you your favourite chai."

"Our chai."

Although Nikhat hailed a laugh, she obeyed and settled on the couch. While I was in the kitchen, I heard her shuffle through something that could be those bags she had brought, and then she moved towards the familiar objects.

There was something very personal about the smoky clink of cups, the flicking of tea packets, and the audible sound of the kettle being turned on. We had already accomplished this task a million times. Like she had never left.

She called out from the living room, "Are you making chai?".

I muttered, not taking any action. "Do you think I could make something else?".

She said, "Very well," as if she would have left had I not responded.»

She entered the kitchen and hugged me from behind, holding me like she never surrendered. The air held the scent of ginger and cardamom between us.. I divided the tea into two mugs and added sugar to each one, then carried off. With an aloof smile accepting her thanks.

For a period of time, we were both silent.

It was dark in the room and only the streetlamp's light could penetrated the curtains. Bruno had positioned himself at the feet of Nikhat, his tail racing lazily on the ground. "

I glanced at her without hesitation.

Looking at her cup, she had her fingers wrapped around it for warmth and her brows were slightly raised, as though lost in thought. It was like looking into space.

"You okay?" I asked.

Nikhat blinked, as if taken aback by what I had observed."". With her lips twitching, she raised herself and nodded off in disapproval before saying, "Yeah.". Just... doesn't feel real yet."

"I hollered and drank my tea."

The look she gave me was unreadable. Why? I thought for a moment that she was going to say something significant.' She shook her head and took a sip of her chai, just as quickly.

I let it go. For now.

With her tone softening, Fateh's voice whispered "Happy birthday."

I emitted air from my nose, breathing slowly and without any discomfort. I smiled, small but sincere. "Thanks for coming, Nikhat."

And then, the silence shifted.

Not the comfortable kind. Not the one that came with hushed understanding.' Our inability to communicate for months was compounded by a heavier silence.'

Her cup was laid down by Nikhat, with her fingers catching in her lap. She expressed her intention, her voice barely rising above a murmur. "I promised you that." She nodded off.

Something in my chest twisted.

My mouth was opened and I slowly placed my cup on the table.

Her eyes flickered backwards at me. "And you didn't?"

I was left with a sharp lung until it reached my control. "Nikhat—" the next word.

Her voice intensified as she replied with a firm reply, "No, Fateh."

You left me first. With a smile on her face, she admitted to herself, "We'll sort it out, and then you stirred things up." "You distanced yourself from me like I was a joke."

"You left Bombay."

"You abandoned me," she retorted.

I held my hands underneath the table. "I didn't want to restrict you." Afterward, I put my hand down my back.

Her laughter was brief and bitter. So instead, you just disappeared? You thought that was better?"

It didn't matter what I did.

In reality, I had a feeling she was correct.

I had pulled away. I believed that if I wasn't in her life, she would move on without me holding her back. This was my conviction. I believed it would be less painful in that manner.

I was wrong.

Without any warning, Nikhat shook her head and exhaled deeply. "How did I feel about not knowing you in a new city or life?" she blurted out. To what extent was it challenging to be the one waiting? To have the impression that I was

the only one who had the motivation to keep trying. What would you do?

By the end of it, her voice crackled and I felt a certain warmth under my skin.

As Bruno leaned to her feet, he whispered and felt the air change. Looking down, Nikhat sewed her fingers through his fur in an absent-minded manner while her eyes still shone into mine.

"I never lost interest," I said, my voice low and almost strained.

She stayed in my mind, scanning, measuring.' In an understated manner, she inquired, "What led you to behave like that?".

I had no good answer. Only regret.

There was only a hollow sensation of all the lost time, and moments I had let slip through due to my excessive fear. Too frightened to interfere with her. Anxious to be inadequate. Too scared to consider the consequences of needing her in my circumstances.

She stooped silently against the couch, her eyes closed for a moment. "I don't want to fight tonight," she whispered, with her voice becoming soft in response.

Neither did I.

The moment she arrived.

She reappeared with the brightness of my life, despite my months-long belief that I didn't need it.

I pulled a hand through my hair, exhaling slowly. "It's not true."

Despite our continued silence, it wasn't angry anymore.

It was just exhausting. I slowly drank my tea once more. She did, too, brushing her fingers against the cup's rim in a way that indicated she was still thinking.

Unaware of the tension, Bruno threw his paws out and pulled Nikhat's knee. Despite the distance, she let out a soft sigh and managed to control it by cracking her lip and smiling slightly in front of him.

So that was our only option."

We were sitting in the dark of my living room, drinking tea with Bruno stretched between us, filling the gaps we didn't know how to repair just yet.

Maybe we weren't okay. It's possible that there were still a significant number of unmentioned details. She had not been here for months. That was sufficient for the time being.

The silence between us was still, full of words we had not spoken before. I should have said something. My throat was sore, it felt as though I could try to talk without causing harm.

Nikhat's fingers encircled her cup, making me look up at her before she returned to the tea in her hands. At that point, I questioned whether she had any awareness. The watch and shoes were not significant to her if she had knowledge of them. The most exceptional present I've ever received was her.

But I didn't say it.

I chose to take a slow breath, put my cup aside, and massaged my jeans with my palms. My fingers were pressed into place by the warmth of my nails. Despite my efforts to keep myself together, I could sense a loss of control due to the walls and distance I had spent over the past months building up my bond with them.

Nikhat noticed. Of course, she did.

She slowly sipped her tea and moved towards me. "Fateh," she whispered, with her voice softening slightly now, as if nothing had happened yet but worry.

Trying to avoid the inevitable, I shook my head. But she didn't let me.

With her fingers cinching my wrist, she laid me down on the ground. "Oh, no."

The simplest and most familiar term caused me to break down something inside.

I snorted deeply, my head projected into my hands. The shock of my shoulders was only felt when I perceived her warmth beside me.

After moving closer, Nikhat's arms were positioned around me.

Her ability to close the gap between us quickly caused me to freeze for half a second. I couldn't believe it. I stopped thinking when she tugged on me."

I had my forehead pinned against her shoulder, with an odd gasp of air and my fingers curling into the fabric in her sweater as if she was the only thing holding me up. She had a similar scent, with slight jasmine and remnants of the nighttime air that were very familiar to me.

She didn't say anything. Had not instructed me to clarify or exit.

She just held me.

Slowly tracking the small, calming circles of my back with her fingers, she whispered: "I'm here -- steady voice... I'm there, Fateh." (Laughter.)

My jaw was closed as I tightly shut my eyes.

It made me feel bad that she had to say it. My heart was shattered after spending hours trying to convince myself that I didn't have to hear it.

Because I did. I needed her here.

"I couldn't do it without you," I admitted, my voice barely rising above a murmur. "Yes, I tried." It was remarked.

I reassured myself that you would be better off. My throat swelled up. It felt like the situation was getting worse.

Nikhat's arms tightened around me.

She whispered, "I thought I didn't need you any more."

Shaking my head to her shoulder, I declared, "I've never had the desire for more."

Despite her breath getting stuck, she didn't let it stop. Her voice was soft and firm as she gently pressed her chin against my forehead. "Next, don't try to escape me again."

I exhaled shakily. "I won't."

For some time she remained like that in the darkness of my bedroom, holding me together while Bruno curled up at our feet as if watching from above.

Perhaps we weren't quite in good shape yet. It could be that there are still holes to mend. For the first time in months, I allowed myself to think that we could be."

A few hours passed before we were sitting in our coffee shop.

It was the first time we crossed paths. During the instance where she had been sitting across from me, her eyes shining bright and trying to challenge my perception of what I believed I knew.

She looked different now. Softer, maybe. Or maybe just tired.

Two cappuccinos were set down after the barista recognized us and didn't hesitate to ask for help. "Sleeping?" asked Nikhat. He nodded in amazement. What happened next? Reminded me that I enjoy drinking cappuccinos.

My laughter echoed, my head raised. "I can't fathom why you put up such a challenge on me."

The woman imitated "Principle" by savoring the beverage and placing her elbow on the table. "This is surreal."

I raised my eyebrow. "Can you tell me where the coffee shop is?"

She rolled her eyes. "No. Being here. With you."

With my fingers clasped tightly around my cup, I exhaled slowly. "Yeah.". Feels like a dream."

Her demeanor shifted, somewhat. "A satisfactory one?"

I observed her with intrigue, the way her hair creased and hissing in her lips as if she was trying to hide it from me.

"The best."

There was nothing in the air except for a brief moment where we were just sitting. Her hand caught my attention as I reached across the table to pull her towards me.

But I didn't.

I couldn't approach her. Why? Not yet.

I had doubts about her potential.

Warmness and effortless coziness were the result of a brief period.

Walking through the city, we slipped back into a dangerously natural rhythm. I had lunch at my favorite spot while wandering the streets with no end in sight, memorizing old memories....

I was already at my apartment when we arrived, but it didn't take us long.

The clock ticked past eleven. Although her laughter still lingered in our midst, there was now something else. Something heavier.

The thought of walking her to the door, heart racing, and bracing for her departure was something I had to do.

Because she was going to go away.

That's how this went.

Chapter 27: Nikhat

Night fell by quickly, with a quiet and peaceful atmosphere. Not that of the kind that went through embarrassing paucity holes or filled voids where words should be. This silence was different. The object was weighed down, burdened with an unidentified force, yet delicate. Silence that had too much to it.' The.

The balcony railing was where Fateh leaned, with the city lights casting shadows over his face. His coffee had been sitting in the cup for some time, and his fingers were squirting around its center. With his jaw tightly set, he gazed at the horizon and contemplated something else. It was me.

His assumption was that I would not return. The slight tension in his body and shoulders, which indicated they were getting ready for impact, was evident. It was like he was shaking from within. And God, I hated that. It saddened me to hear him become used to watching us walk away. A certain part of him anticipated it.

Taking in the air, I held onto the edges of my sleeves. ". Despite the intense beating of my heart, I chose to ignore it. This was it. This was the moment.

I spent the entire day with him, savoring every moment, eye view, and touch like I had been depriving myself of it. Because I had been. It was a long, exhausting, and painful journey that had taken me through until now. Until today. Until I saw him again.

Fateh. Despite being in such deep hiding, the man who had managed to stay with me for so long had never left. My time was up when I realized I couldn't handle living without him.

Came closer, hugged him from behind. Despite his lack of movement, he didn't approach me in any way.

"Long day?" I murmured.

His lips curved slightly, but they didn't reach his eyes. "The most exceptional."

Two words hit it hard, weighing down their impact. I was aware of what he wasn't saying. Why? It had been the most exceptional day of my life.' The break had been a respite from the pain and isolation. From missing us.

I swallowed, my eyes blinked as I stood before the sudden burn.' The look in his eyes had caught my attention. That guarded hope. That quiet fear.

Not anymore.

Holding him close, I pressed my hands against his chest and felt his heart race. "Fateh." He replied.

After a while, he fixed his gaze on me with one eye contact. Leaning over, I observed his ardent eyes tightly draped over mine as they waited. Did he look stunning in the moonlight, with his hair frizzy and unreadable eyes?

I inhaled sharply. Say it, Nikhat.

"I'm not going."

For a second, nothing happened. He turned to face me.

Afterward, with a slight furrow on his forehead and cocky head, he asked. "Are you --?".

My voice grew steadier as I said, "Yes," and then I could hear myself. "I'm going back."

He spit his lips but there was no sound. He felt his fingers twirling around his cup, tightening and loosening, as if his brain was struggling to process what I had just said.

I moved forward once more, closing the gap between us. "I'll never go back again, Fateh." How about you? I'm not running. I'm staying. I'm staying here, with you."

Still, he said nothing. Yet, he maintained a passive gaze at me, his expression blurred, and his breath was slow and firm, as though unable to trust his response.

I exhaled softly. "Say something."

He blinked. Subsequently, he let go of his coffee cup and gently scraped the small table with his fingertips.

He moved before I had the opportunity to document it.

We were separated by space within a second.' He held me close the next time.'"... My favourite place to be.

He had hands all around me, grabbing my waist and pressing my hair into his mouth, as if to fear for my safety. How did he do it? The sound of him breathing was a stark contrast between his breath and my hair, with the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. My arms swung around the neck, I pressed my face into his shoulder and said: "I'm back," with a slight crack in my voice. "Not anymore."

He swung. "Tell it again." I said.

But I pulled back, just to look at him. His eyes were irate, desperate and nearly terrified as though he was verifying that this wasn't a dream. With my fingers tracking the edges of his jaw, I grasped his face. "I'll stay where you are," I whispered softly. "For ever."

Fateh was home. Not a city. Not a place. Him.

Fateh didn't let go. He pressed his forehead against mine, with short, rough breaths. "You're not supposed to take this back," he whispered. "Not tomorrow, then." Not next week. "I won't ever do that, it's never going to happen," I said

softly, my hand firmly planted on his cheek. "Not even if you dare me to go." His lips flicked.

I let out a soft roar, ran my fingers through his hair. "You're stuck here," he said softly before closing his eyes. He exhaled slightly. Then he opened them again and they looked different. Lighter. Free.

Your birthday gift choice was fantastic, Nikhat.

I grinned. "Best one yet?"

He appeared less serious. "Best moment of all time."

Grasping him, I ran my fingers through his. As if he had been waiting to do it forever, a sudden squeeze back was felt.

And maybe he had.

Maybe we both had.

I leaned towards him, my head resting on his chest. His heartbeat was steady, strong. It sounded like home. Like belonging.

It's time to finally be where I wanted to be.

His breath hitched. And then—he kissed me.

It wasn't slow. It wasn't gentle. The task was immediate and demanding, with an abundance of unspoken language. He seemed to be desperate, his lips crashing into mine like he was carving out the truth from my words.

In a moment, I had been gazing into his eyes and trying to convince him that I was not leaving again. His lips were on me, his hands gripping me like he was afraid I would slip between his fingers. It was overwhelming. The intensity. The pressure from everything up until this moment.

My body became stiff without conscious intention, not due to my lack of desire. The mind was unable to comprehend the sudden change in my heart and brain. It felt like an impossible task. Fateh, who had been guarding his emotions for a long time and seemed uncertain about whether to trust me or leave me alone, was simply kissing my skin.

I felt a sudden pull of his hand against my back, which made me feel so close that his entire body was shaking.

Fateh. Trembling. I felt it as though I had been struck in the chest. This wasn't just a kiss. This was everything.

Throughout our time apart. Every word left unsaid. Each ache, longing and night he had spent wondering whether I would ever return."". Without warning, I was frozen in time.

The sight of his fingers intertwining with my hair and his lips rubbing against me with great desperation left an indelible impression. The sudden sway in his chest felt like it was falling slowly, as if he was taking me in and trying to memorize every second of it.

I felt him.

And my heart shattered.

The purpose of my hand being on his chest was not to push him away, but to make him stop and look at me closely. His constant kissing, which he believed was an attempt to make me disappear, could lead to my breaking up.

Unable to breathe, I said: "Fateh," whispered up against his cheek.

He stilled instantly.

With his forehead rubbing against mine, he breathed in sharp, unevenly. He wasn't able to completely get away and

move back, but his hold on me was tight enough for me to move forward somewhat.

Despite opening my eyes, I couldn't get my fingers out of his shirt. His eyes were closed, and his jaw was clenched as if he had been holding it all along.

"Sorry, I mumbled," his cheek was in close contact.

The warmth of his skin beneath my touch, a reminder of the pain he had been struggling to extricate himself to, made me cry. "I'm here," sounded on his lips and in his final look at me, his expression took hold.

I exhaled softly.

He had spent countless hours striving to become the resilient man who could carry his weight. Currently, he was not that individual. What happened? For now, his only being is Fateh—the other one. This man had been struggling for months, and my absence was necessary to comfort him and ensure his well-being. He had just embraced me like I was his life-sentient.".

At that point in time, I was cognizant.

I was aware that nothing in this world could ever make me want to go back.

As we embraced, a sudden discomfort developed within me, which was not previously felt. It seemed like an unknown source of pain. After a brief period of inactivity, my mind suddenly woke up and reminded me of the genuine emotion. It was all so real.

I felt a mixture of panic and hesitation inside. What now? What did I need to do? Just... stay? Perch in his arms as if it were new territory.?

Fateh had not yet released me, his hands still resting on my waist, and his breath lingering in my mind. But I needed space. I needed to think.

So I stepped back. He fell with both of his arms, his expression incomprehensible.

My first move was to get moving, I said.

His brows furrowed. "Nikhat—".

He didn't say much, but I shook my head. "I just have to process.". It's been an exhausting day.

That wasn't a lie. A prolonged day. My mind was spiraling out of control, causing me to lose focus on what had just happened.

Fateh scanned my face, as if trying to comprehend the sudden change in me. But he didn't stop me. He gave a slow, still look at his chest and put his hands into his pockets.

"Okay, " he said quietly.

And that was it.

The entire time, I turned and left his apartment with my heart pounding against my ribs.

The city that had once belonged to me was visible from the window of my hotel bed, as I sat there that night. Street lighting was softly glowing against the glass, and shadows were stretching and changing as cars occasionally plowed beneath them.' It's hard to believe that Mumbai ever slept, but now it felt like the entire world was still.

Still, a storm was present within me.

As I exhaled, I rubbed my fingers against my hair to maintain the tension in my mind as thoughts swirled. After being separated for months, I spent the entire day with Fateh and convinced myself that our relationship was over.

After midnight, he had kissed me and seemed to be waiting for me to come back. It was a beautiful moment.

God, he'd kissed me.

And what did I do? I left.

My eyes remained closed as I felt the impact of my actions against my ribs. It was so painful.

The moment arrived, and I didn't fully process it. His lips slammed onto mine, his fingers clung to my sleeves, as if for fear of my disappearing again. The unfiltered water was as icy as the breaking of a barrier, after months of holding on.'

It had caused a profound emotional reaction in me.

Not expecting that, not preparing for the rush of emotion with it. The warmth, apprehension, the certainty in his hold on me.'

My descent was triggered by that certainty.

The reason is that Fateh wasn't the type to act without purpose. He wasn't reckless. He wasn't impulsive. The intensity of his feelings matched with his ability to care for others.

His kissing and pulling me close, which he never wanted to let go of, had some significance. What did they mean?

And that terrified me.

The fact that it allowed me to break him was significant. I could still be without him.

Without warning, I paced through the small area of my hotel room, arms tightly gripping my chest. The silent silence was broken only by the whispered sound of the air-conditioning in the background. It was necessary for me to leave my own thoughts behind. My thoughts were too intense for me to continue.

Because I knew the truth. It was something I had been aware of for a long time, even when I tried to hide it.

I loved him. I had always loved him.

Abstaining from that reality was not going to alter it. Nevertheless,

I stopped breathing, my heart raced against my ribs.

Why did I leave?

What caused me to leave in that manner? Can you explain.

It took me a long time to reveal the truth after months of being apart, longing for someone and eventually losing him. I was touched by the way he kissed me and the sound of his hands shaking when embracing him. He wanted me. He wanted us.

And yet, I had left.

Like a complete idiot.

I lamented, shivering in my pillow.

Throughout the night, I replayed every look and word in my mind."". Leaving him alone, I had the ability to imagine what would have happened if I hadn't been so consumed with thoughts. But the damage was done. It's likely that I had left him there questioning everything.

And I hated that. My fear, which was both irrational and unwise, made me feel sickened to admit it. I loathed this. My gaze widened as I held my cellphone.

I could text him. I could call him. The words that had been sitting in my heart for a longer time than I could count could be spoken to him right after his arrival.

I love you, Fateh.

The thought made my stomach squirm. Yet this time, I had no desire to run. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I was scheduled to do what I should have done months ago. I was about to reveal everything to him.

Chapter 28: The One for Me

I didn't think it would feel like this.

Standing there, dressed in a simple outfit Fateh once said I looked beautiful in, my hands clutched a bouquet of his favorite white lilies. The cool breeze danced through my hair as I waited, my heart drumming in sync with the footsteps I prayed to hear.

I had been a mess of nerves all day, questioning everything. Was this too much? Did I get it all wrong? Was I about to embarrass myself in front of the only person I couldn't imagine losing?

The truth is, I've fallen for him. Mindlessly, hopelessly, carelessly. Somewhere between the quiet moments where he listened to me ramble about the world and the loud ones where he challenged me to be better, I gave him my heart. And despite the distance, the arguments, the uncertainty—he has been the constant, my compass.

But now, standing here, waiting for Fateh, I wondered if he still wanted me. Wanted us.

When he appeared, walking toward me, I froze. His shirt was slightly wrinkled, and his hair was an adorable mess, like he had been running his hands through it a thousand times—a habit he had when he was anxious. My chest tightened as our eyes locked.

"You're here," I whispered, more to myself than to him.

And just like that, my world felt right again.

I couldn't believe she was standing there, holding white lilies—the kind my mom used to love. My breath caught, and for a moment, I thought I was dreaming. She looked beautiful, not in the way people describe models on magazine covers, but in the way that made everything else around her fade into the background.

I had been terrified walking up to her. What if this was it? What if she was here to tell me goodbye? I'd run every worst-case scenario in my head on the way here, and yet, I couldn't stay away. Not from her.

Her voice pulled me out of my thoughts. "You're here."

I nodded, my throat too tight to speak.

Because she's my world. She's the reason I want to be better, to fight harder, to stay even when it feels like the ground beneath me is crumbling. Nikhat isn't just someone I love—she's the reason I've been able to believe in love at all.

"Why do you look so nervous?" I asked, a small smile creeping onto my lips.

He exhaled sharply, raking a hand through his hair. "Because I'm afraid I'll mess this up."

"You won't."

"Won't I?" he asked, stepping closer. His voice cracked slightly, and my heart ached. "Nikhat, I don't think you understand. I've been trying to say this for so long, and every time, I get in my own way. I'm scared I'll ruin it. Ruin us. But I can't keep this in anymore."

I've rehearsed this moment a thousand times. Every word carefully chosen, every scenario played out in my mind. And yet, standing here, with her looking at me like I'm the only person in the world, I forgot everything.

“I love you,” I blurted out, my voice trembling. “I’ve loved you for so long that I can’t remember what it feels like not to. I tried not to, you know. I thought maybe I wasn’t good enough for you, that you deserved someone with fewer flaws, someone who could give you a perfect life. But I’m done running from this. From you.”

Her eyes softened, and for a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

“I don’t need perfect,” she said quietly. “I just need you.”

I thought I would cry. Or laugh. Or maybe both. But all I could do was step closer and whisper, “Say it again.”

“I love you,” he said, his voice steadier now. “Be mine, Nikhat. Forever. Please.”

The world melted away. The doubts, the fears, the pain of the past—they all disappeared in that moment. I reached out, my fingers brushing against his.

“I already am,” I whispered.

Her words hit me like a wave, and before I knew it, I was pulling her into my arms. She fit perfectly, like she was always meant to be there.

We stayed like that for what felt like forever, wrapped in each other, the rest of the world fading into the background.

“I can’t promise I’ll never make mistakes,” I said, my voice muffled against her hair. “But I promise I’ll always fight for us. For you.”

Her hands tightened around me. “And I promise to remind you that you’re worth it. Every single day.”

In his arms, I felt it—the kind of love that doesn't ask for perfection but chooses you anyway. The kind of love that fights, that forgives, that stays.

For the first time in a long time, I wasn't afraid of what was to come. Because no matter what the future held, I knew one thing for certain.

Fateh was my home. My choice. My forever.

And as we stood there, holding on to each other, I knew I'd never let go.

Because Nikhat wasn't just my lifeline. She was my everything.

"Be mine?" I asked again, my voice barely a whisper.

Her smile lit up the fading daylight. "I already told you," she said, leaning closer. "I'm yours. Always."

His hands moved slowly to cradle my face, my thumbs brushing over the tear tracks he didn't realize were there. It was like we were trying to hold together the pieces of us that had been scattered by everything we had gone through. He could sense my eyes—wet with the same unshed tears—and for a moment, it felt like we had both come home.

"Fateh?"

"Hmm?"

"You missed me?"

"Yes." he let out a small giggle before answering, after hearing the same question I always asked him, almost knowing the following words.

"You love me?" He was right, he knew me, his answer was different than usual though.

There was a pause, longer than usual, and I could feel his gaze on me even without looking up. “For an eternity and after.”