

From the Edge of the Sky to the Heart of Home

FIGHTER PILOT'S *Vow*

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Dedication

I'm grateful to Karteek, who quietly took over so much at home while I disappeared into writing, making space for this book to exist.

To Mira, for understanding in her own gentle way that “mummy is busy,” and for offering love, patience, and the sweetest interruptions.

To Teesta, my first reader, my sharpest critic, and the one who always told me the truth I needed to hear.

And to Moumita, who read these pages over endless cups of coffee in far too many swanky places, listening, questioning, and encouraging every step of the way.

Chapter 1

The invitation had sounded ordinary enough when it came through the squadron grapevine: dinner at the Group Captain's residence, a small gathering, nothing formal.

Still, when Kabir turned his motorcycle into the quiet lane lined with neem trees and whitewashed boundary walls, the evening felt charged in a way he couldn't quite explain. Maybe it was the lingering hum of the day's work at WAC, strategy meetings that stretched like invisible maps across his mind. Maybe it was simply the Delhi dusk – soft, dusty gold fading into night.

He parked, ran a hand through his hair—still damp from a shower hastily taken at the quarters—and walked toward the open gate. The house glowed from within, warm rectangles of light spilling onto the garden where a faint breeze moved the leaves of the potted palms. Laughter carried out into the night, easy and familiar, the sound of people bound together by strange pressures and shared understandings.

Something brushed his shin. A sandy stray dog, ear folded sideways, paused, studied him solemnly – then leaned against his leg like an old friend who had finally found where to rest.

Kabir bent and scratched behind the dog's ear. The dog exhaled – content, assured. From the doorway, the orderly grinned. "Adopted, sir. Stray. This one is new – Asif."

Kabir smiled, straightened, and stepped in through the heavy wooden door. Inside, the Group Captain's wife greeted him warmly, ushering him into the drawing room with a fond, "You're just in time, Kabir. Come—everyone's already arguing about cricket again."

Kabir smiled, murmured thanks, and stepped in.

He was dressed in a simple open-collar white shirt, a navy blazer, trousers pressed with a precision that had become second nature. Polished shoes. The faintest trace of cologne. He looked like he had walked out of a magazine photograph someone had tried to pretend was candid. But it wasn't vanity; it was habit. He belonged to a world where discipline lingered even in the corners of ordinary life.

The drawing room hummed with laughter and conversation — officers, spouses, a few familiar faces from command. A few heads turned his way. Nods. Handshakes. Someone clapped his shoulder. Kabir shook hands, nodded, smiled. He carried himself with that unforced composure people trusted — the air of someone who didn't need to assert presence; it simply gathered around him.

Across the room, talk flowed — operations, upcoming exercises, coordination headaches, the constant work of keeping a vast machine alert and ready. Kabir joined in easily. He spoke about readiness plans, joint drills, the delicate choreography between fighter bases and command. His tone remained light, understated — but people listened. His reputation followed him quietly: Sukhoi veteran, TACDE-trained, calm under pressure, one of those men who looked unflappable even when everyone else had started to fray.

And yet: the air felt heavier, as though the room were aware of something waiting to happen.

He sensed her before he saw her.

It was a flicker of movement near the hallway, the rustle of fabric. Then she stepped into the drawing room—and everything else fell away for a moment.

She wore a saree the color of stormy skies, a quiet, deep gray-blue that caught the light like a secret. The fabric skimmed her frame with unhurried grace. Her hair had been loosely pinned, a few strands escaping to brush her jaw. Her face was composed, beautifully so—yet curious, as though she held inside her a question no one had asked properly.

Aditi.

He didn't know her name yet, but the word would come to feel inevitable.

She was talking to the Group Captain's wife, listening intently, nodding in that thoughtful, deliberate way that implied she took conversations seriously. She wasn't performing. She wasn't trying.

He found himself watching the way she adjusted the edge of her saree when she laughed softly at something. The gesture was small. Ordinary. But it anchored him.

The Group Captain noticed him hovering on the periphery and beckoned. "Kabir! Come, meet my niece."

She turned. Their eyes met.

There are instants that do not announce themselves as extraordinary. They just... settle. Then ripple outward.

For Kabir, the room tilted almost imperceptibly, as though the gravity in it had shifted.

"Squadron Leader Kabir," the Group Captain said with an affectionate pride that bordered on teasing. "One of our best."

"Please don't believe any of that," Kabir replied, extending a hand lightly. "It only makes expectations worse."

Her palm was warm—unexpectedly warm—when it touched his. Her fingers were slender, steady. "Aditi," she said. "It's nice to meet you."

Her voice was soft, but not timid. There was clarity in it. And something else he couldn't name. He let their handshake linger half a second longer than necessary—and saw the faintest flicker in her eyes, the quick intake of breath she disguised with a smile.

They began with the usual questions — work, city life, traffic that tested patience. But very quickly, the conversation slid under the surface. Something in her tone suggested a life in quiet flux.

"So you don't fly anymore?" she asked — not idly, not like someone hungry for glamour.

He thought for a moment. "Not right now," he said. "WAC keeps me busy. Planning, coordination, crisis management, exercises... It's different. Less

adrenaline. More accountability.” He paused. “I used to love the cockpit for the noise. Now I respect the silence of thinking five moves ahead.”

“And do you miss it?” she asked gently.

He gave a small smile. “Sometimes. But life isn’t always about staying in the sharpest light. Sometimes you step back so the picture holds.”

Something changed in her expression—something like recognition. She nodded once, as though the shape of that truth made sense to her.

A junior officer drifted over, and the two conversations merged. Banter flared—off-base dinners, and the legendary early mornings that defined their lives. Kabir spoke, laughed, deflected. But his attention carried a hidden orbit; it circled back to her.

The Group Captain’s wife called everyone toward the dining area. Chairs scraped, glasses were lifted, jokes continued seamlessly. The long table glowed beneath the pale light of overhead lamps. Platters of food steamed gently—homely, abundant.

Kabir ended up seated two places away from Aditi, diagonally across. Close enough to see her, far enough that they would be drawn into different threads of conversation.

She spoke to the officer beside her, listening with genuine interest as he described a humanitarian mission the squadron had flown after floods. Kabir talked with a senior engineer about maintenance schedules and the subtle anxieties of aging aircraft. But every few minutes, his gaze slipped.

And found hers doing the same.

They both looked away, then back, almost at the same time. Something between them tightened—neither uncomfortable nor aggressive. Just undeniable.

Across the table, someone nudged Kabir. “Tell them about your TACDE stint, Kabir,” the man grinned. “He won’t mention it unless forced.”

Kabir rolled his eyes. A ripple of amused protest circled the table. Kabir shook his head. “It’s not a story. It’s just training,” he said mildly.

“Training,” someone snorted. “The kind that breaks half the people who try. And you came back saying it was ‘interesting.’”

Laughter. Good-natured.

Aditi didn’t laugh. Not out of disapproval—but because she was listening carefully again, reading between the words. Her eyes were steady on him.

“What did you find interesting about it?” she asked gently, when the noise dipped and conversation splintered again.

He looked at her fully then. “That it teaches you,” he said slowly, “how much of what you think is strength is just ego. And how much of survival is humility.”

The table went quiet for a moment—not dramatically, but as if a collective pause had been placed in the center of the evening.

Then chatter resumed. But inside that pause, something had passed between them. A current. A line drawn, invisible and real.

Dinner went on—flavors, laughter, the clink of spoons against plates. The air smelled faintly of ghee and roasted cumin. Outside, dogs barked at distant shadows. The world was ordinary again.

Except nothing felt ordinary anymore.

Every time she smiled at someone else’s story, Kabir felt an inexplicable tug. Every time he said something and heard her soft, delayed laugh across the table, heat settled quietly beneath his ribs.

Aditi, for her part, found herself noting things she should not have been cataloguing: the clean lines of his profile, the patient way he let others finish before speaking, the controlled economy of his gestures. She had met men who postured, men who needed to be seen. He was different. He carried an intensity that asked nothing from anyone else and yet drew attention nonetheless.

She felt foolishly aware of her pulse.

After dinner, they drifted back into the drawing room. Cups of tea appeared, along with a plate of sweets. The conversation shifted to movies, then to travel, then to the peculiar loneliness of postings in remote areas.

A natural opening formed—one of those strange, rare moments where two people break temporarily from the crowd without actually moving away from it.

“So,” he said softly, standing beside her near the bookshelf, “how long are you in their house for?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I keep pretending I have a plan. But I don’t.”

“That can be... freeing,” he said.

“And terrifying.”

He nodded. “Often both at once.”

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They shared a small smile. Not flirtatious. Just... true.

Silence stretched between them—not awkward, not urgent. A silence that allowed breath, allowed thought. She traced her finger along the spine of a book she wasn’t really seeing. He watched the movement, then forced himself to look away.

A dog hopped onto the couch beside Aditi and curled trustingly into the curve of her arm. She stroked him absently, as if her hands had always known that rhythm.

“You’re good with them,” Kabir said.

She smiled. “They tell you the truth about people. If they feel safe, I pay attention.”

He nodded — oddly moved.

He had not expected this. Not tonight. Not at a dinner that, by routine, should have blended into all the others. “Are you free tomorrow evening?” The question escaped him with surprising gentleness.

She turned to him, startled not by the invitation but by the calm certainty in his tone—as though he were simply acknowledging something both of them already knew.

“I might be,” she said slowly. “Why?”

“Because I’d like to continue this conversation,” he said. “Without ten people listening in.”

She laughed then, quiet and sudden, warmth flooding her face. “Dinner?”

“Dinner,” he confirmed. “Someplace simple.”

She hesitated. Not out of lack of interest—but because a part of her stirred with caution. She had been careful with herself lately. Guarded. She wasn’t sure she wanted to open that door again, not yet.

But another part of her—quieter, steadier—recognized something in him that did not alarm her. He felt grounded. Real. Not a storm she would be swept away by, but a force she could lean into.

“All right,” she said softly. “Dinner.”

They exchanged numbers. No flourish. No theatrics. Just a few words, a brief brush of fingers as phones passed back and forth. And yet, that tiny contact sent a startling flare through them both.

The evening wound down. People began to leave in twos and threes, offering goodbyes and promises to meet again on base, at the mess, during morning PT. The Group Captain clapped Kabir on the shoulder with paternal affection.

“Drive safe,” he said. “And try not to think about work tonight for once.”

Kabir smiled. “I’ll try, sir.”

Outside, the night had cooled. The smell of wet earth hung faintly in the air, though it hadn’t rained. He walked to his motorcycle, aware of the strange fullness in his chest. He swung a leg over, paused, and looked back once.

The front door had just closed. But behind it, somewhere in that warmly lit house, she was moving through her thoughts—and he had the irrational urge to know exactly what they were.

The engine started with a low growl. He rode away, the road stretching ahead like a ribbon of quiet black. The city around him blurred, and yet his mind remained sharply, painfully clear.

He replayed their conversations. The cadence of her voice. The way she had asked questions—not to impress, not to pry, but to understand. He heard her

laughter across the table, light and restrained. He remembered the warmth of her palm in his.

And under all of it, he felt that sensation—the one that had earlier shifted the gravity in the room. Not infatuation. Not fantasy. Something deeper and more unnerving: recognition, as though parts of his life had suddenly aligned of their own volition.

By the time he reached his quarters, he was no closer to naming it. But he knew with startling certainty that he didn't want the feeling to pass.

Aditi lay on her back later, staring at the ceiling fan blur slowly overhead. The room was quiet, the faint hum of the night seeping through the window. Her saree was neatly folded on a chair; she had changed into a simple cotton nightshirt. Her hair spilled across the pillow, loosened entirely now.

She closed her eyes—and saw him instantly. Not as the others saw him—great pilot, Squadron Leader, the one people spoke about in half-joking reverence. She saw the stillness beneath all that. The reflective, self-contained man who spoke about humility like it was a companion he had learned to respect.

And that unsettled her. She wasn't sure she was ready for someone like that. She had been protecting a fragile interior space for too long, and she wasn't accustomed to lowering the guard simply because the world placed someone intriguing in front of her.

But the memory of his voice lingered. The steadiness of it. The absence of games.

You don't have to decide anything tonight, she told herself.

Still, she reached for her phone and looked at his name—newly added to her contacts, sitting there like a quiet possibility.

Something inside her whispered—not loudly, not demandingly, but with a weight she couldn't ignore: *Don't walk away from this out of fear.*

She sighed, pressing the phone to her chest for a heartbeat before setting it aside.

Sleep came slowly. Not restless, not upsetting—just threaded through with awareness. Every time she drifted, she found herself wandering back to the

dinner table, to that unspoken current stretching across plates and conversations.

Somewhere between waking and dreaming, she realized she was looking forward to tomorrow.

And that realization frightened her almost as much as it thrilled her.

In different rooms, under the same night sky, they lay awake, thinking of each other—not with urgency, not with hunger, but with an inexplicable gravity that promised something neither of them yet understood.

Neither tried to seduce the feeling. Neither pushed it away.

They simply acknowledged it, quietly—and allowed it to exist. And in that acknowledgment, something that had begun as coincidence settled into the first faint outline of inevitability.

Chapter 2

The next few days slipped into a pattern that did not announce itself.

A message here. A call there. Dinner once more. Then coffee instead. Then a walk that lasted far longer than either intended.

It wasn't intentional. It wasn't discussed. It simply... happened, like a river deciding it would rather curve than run straight.

Nothing dramatic. Nothing labeled. Yet something inside each encounter loosened — like fabric softening with wear.

They began to recognize the small rituals of each other — the ones that reveal themselves only when two people are no longer strangers pretending not to care. She always tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear when she was about to say something vulnerable.

He, on the other hand, had a different tell. When he was thinking — truly thinking — he would lightly tap his knuckle twice against the table or the arm of his chair, as if confirming that the ground beneath the moment was steady. A quiet, almost unconscious gesture — clearing space in his head, grounding himself before he spoke.

It was subtle, almost invisible. But she noticed. And the noticing made something inside her soften.

On their fourth evening together — a quiet, nondescript café near the base — the moment came almost unnoticed.

Familiar checkered tablecloths. A ceiling fan that clicked a little too loudly. A chalkboard menu that had not been updated in weeks. Outside, dusk brushed

the sky into muted purples. Inside, conversations hummed and faded like waves.

They were laughing at something trivial — an absurd story about a squadron superstition involving mismatched socks and miraculous landings, and an unspoken belief that fate has a sense of humour.

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“That cannot be real,” she said, incredulous, leaning forward, eyes bright.

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“Oh, it’s very real,” Kabir replied. “The practical world lives side by side with irrational rituals. You don’t question good luck. You nod politely and let it stay.”

Her laugh spilled out, unguarded — fuller than the ones before, echoing off the little square table and surprising even her.

He watched her — and the watching was different now. Less careful. Less moderated. As if he had finally exhaled some long-held breath.

His eyes softened. She saw, for the first time, what he looked like when he wasn’t managing himself. Light. Not childish. Not reckless. Just... light.

The waiter walked by, unobtrusively. Her water glass sat low.

Without thinking, Kabir reached across and refilled it. Not theatrically. Not as a gesture meant to impress. Simply because it seemed obvious to him that she shouldn’t have to ask.

The kind of act that was never announced — only felt.

She smiled — and, on impulse, touched his forearm.

“Hey,” she teased, voice playful but warm, “at least let me pretend I’m capable of pouring my own water.”

He glanced at where her fingers rested — then at her face, amused.

“Permission to continue being unnecessarily considerate?” he asked lightly.

“Denied,” she replied. “But only because you’re far too smug about it.”

Their eyes held. Their smiles didn’t fade.

Her touch lingered a beat longer than politeness required. His skin warmed beneath the cotton — not with shock, but with awareness. As if the gesture carried something electric and quiet, delicate yet undeniable.

She withdrew first. But neither of them pretended the moment hadn't happened.

The air between them felt different afterwards — less like territory and more like shared ground. Their conversations changed. From careful phrasing to easy rhythm. From guarded questions to comfortable teasing. From polite laughter to the kind that leaves softness behind.

They started finishing each other's sentences — not because they thought alike entirely, but because they listened.

He told her about the absurdity of mess dinners where everyone pretended they weren't exhausted, about the odd camaraderie that stitched itself across long nights and endless drills.

She told him about the editor who believed commas were emotional decisions, and therefore deeply moral responsibilities.

He listened — really listened — as if the world paused when she spoke. She relaxed — genuinely — as if, for once, she did not need to guard every edge of herself.

They drifted across topics as though walking through open rooms: books that shaped them, cities that disappointed them, songs that arrived during heartbreak and failed to leave.

And under all that comfort — beneath every laugh, every shared look — something burned. Not loud. Not rushing. But persistent.

Sometimes it appeared in quieter forms — a steady hum when they walked side by side, hands not touching but aware of the possibility.

Kabir did not name it. He did not even analyze it. Naming had weight. Weight made things formal. Formal things demanded plans.

He simply existed inside whatever this was — and found that it made space inside him where heaviness had lived before. He felt lighter in ways he hadn't realized he had been heavy.

Morning briefings didn't press down as sharply. Maps felt cleaner, more focused. The quiet in his room at night no longer echoed with the same hollow persistence.

He thought of Aditi often – and every time, the thought arrived carrying warmth instead of complication. She liked dogs. She asked questions that mattered. She laughed with her entire face. She made him laugh. She somehow made gravity feel optional – without denying that gravity existed.

Why question this? he thought, content. Why dissect something that simply felt... right?

Aditi, meanwhile, met the same evenings again in the silence of her bedroom.

The ceiling fan hummed lazily. The city sounded far away. Her mind refused to sleep. She would replay the moments.

The water glass. The warmth of his forearm beneath her fingertips. The way his eyes lit – not theatrically, not in performance, but from somewhere honest and deep.

Her chest tightened – not from panic this time, but from anticipation, which frightened her more precisely because it felt good.

And then the quiet warning voice arrived, dependable as a nightly ritual. That quiet, persistent guardian of caution that had grown out of heartbreak and stitched itself into her as habit. *Slow down. You barely know where you're standing.*

He is steady now – but what happens if you falter? What happens when complexities surface? Can you carry another person's gravity if yours shifts again?

She stared up at the ceiling, breathing through the thoughts. Nothing about Kabir frightened her. That was perhaps the most unsettling part.

What frightened her was how right it felt – how easily she could imagine letting herself fall without the armor she had spent years carefully reforging piece by fragile piece.

And yet...

The memory of his laughter would slip through the doubt. The warmth of his steady presence. The stray pup they'd both crouched to pet, pressing its head eagerly into both their palms as though acknowledging something between them neither had spoken aloud.

Her caution softened – not erased, but less rigid. Not gone, but willing to coexist with joy.

You're allowed to enjoy this, she reminded herself gently. *You don't have to decide the future tonight.*

She turned on her side and felt the faintest smile tug at her lips. Because happiness has a way of slipping through cracks – even the ones carefully built for protection.

Kabir never saw that internal battle.

He saw a woman whose smile arrived more freely each day. Who leaned into conversations instead of lingering carefully at the edges. Who teased him now without apology, unafraid of being misunderstood.

He didn't realize she still measured every emotional step as if walking across a bridge she had once fallen through.

He only knew this: when they said goodnight – whether by text or in person – the world felt slightly more aligned. As though some long-tilted axis inside him had quietly righted itself.

Their fifth evening took place outdoors – not planned, simply decided upon because the weather had leaned unexpectedly into softness.

They walked along a quiet road flanked by trees whose branches created temporary tunnels of shade. The air smelled faintly of wet earth though it hadn't rained – that scent the ground holds for reasons it refuses to explain.

They spoke of nothing consequential for the first ten minutes – traffic annoyances, a ridiculous advertisement that claimed to fix one's entire life in thirty days, the unfair superiority of well-made chai.

But silence slipped comfortably between conversations – and neither rushed to fill it.

Silence between strangers is awkward. Silence between the almost-connected becomes something else entirely: a shared resting place.

They stopped by a bench overlooking an empty playing field. The wind brushed her hair into her face; she tucked it back, reflexive, unaware of the vulnerability that gesture betrayed.

He noticed — of course he did. He grounded himself before saying softly, “You look... less guarded lately.”

She glanced at him, startled — not offended, just caught off guard by the accuracy. “Is that your pilot way of saying I used to look like a hedgehog?” she joked weakly.

He smiled. “No. More like someone who learned how to build a fortress when it was necessary. And is now cautiously checking whether the drawbridge can lower safely.”

The metaphor landed too close to truth.

She exhaled slowly. “You’re not wrong,” she admitted. “It just takes me time to trust that a space is safe. Or that I’m safe inside it.”

He did something rare then. He didn’t rush to reassure. He didn’t say You’re safe with me — because declarations like that belonged to movies and people who underestimated the future.

He simply nodded, thoughtful. “Take the time you need,” he said quietly. “Walk at your pace. If I’m meant to be in step, I will be. If not... it won’t be because we hurried or forced something.”

She turned toward him, studying his profile — the calm certainty that came not from arrogance, but from a life built on accepting unpredictability without resenting it. Something unclenched inside her.

“Thank you,” she said, and meant it in more ways than the sentence held space for.

They resumed walking.

And the air between them carried a different clarity — like water settling after being stirred.

The pattern continued — deepening without dramatic announcement.

A grocery run suddenly turned shared, because they happened to be in the same neighborhood. A rainy evening turned into coffee and conversation about childhood memories. A weekend afternoon walk ended with ice cream they pretended was for nostalgia rather than indulgence.

They began learning the shapes of each other’s days.

He discovered she hated loud restaurants not because she disliked noise, but because she disliked conversations becoming competitions. She discovered he repaired small things without being asked – loose switches, squeaky cupboard hinges – acts of quiet service that felt almost more intimate than grand gestures.

He laughed when she passionately defended the honor of stationery – pens, notebooks, sticky notes with feelings. She laughed when he insisted that aircraft had personalities.

Their shared language grew – small references, private jokes, little metaphors that meant nothing to anyone else. They were, without realizing it, building a vocabulary of belonging.

And yet – deeper still, beneath ease and affection – something patient was forming. Neither rushed toward it. Neither denied it.

Both sensed it – the way one senses the presence of a coastline long before seeing water: a shift in air, a change in scent, the horizon holding a new possibility.

Kabir slept better. Aditi worried less. He felt steadier. She felt braver.

They remained careful – but they no longer mistook caution for distance.

And somewhere in the gentle intersection of banter and longing, of vulnerability and restraint, a quiet truth began to take shape: They were learning each other gently...while something deeper – patient and inevitable – burned quietly beneath, waiting for the moment it would no longer need to hide.

Chapter 3

The rhythm continued – unmarked, unnamed.

A week. Then two.

Walks that didn't pretend to be anything else. Coffee that somehow stretched into conversations that carried them into dusk. A movie they abandoned halfway because talking had felt better than watching strangers pretend to talk onscreen.

Moments of quiet where neither felt compelled to fill the spaces with noise. They had settled into something that looked deceptively simple.

He refilled her glass before she asked. She nudged his arm when he became too serious. He teased her about hoarding bookmarks in every single room. She rolled her eyes at his obsession with early starts and disciplined bedtimes.

Their comfort grew roots – quiet ones, the sort that push through soil in silence and suddenly one day feel immovable.

But attraction – that stayed as fire beneath the floorboards. Steady. Contained. Very much alive. No declarations. No negotiations. Just a slow, careful awareness that neither dared examine in full daylight.

It changed on a Tuesday.

The day began like any other, flattened by ordinary domestic sounds.

Aditi worked from the little table by the window – the one she had bought on impulse because it reminded her of writing cabins in photographs. She leaned over manuscripts, adding messy margin notes in a handwriting only she could

decipher. The city hummed beyond the glass — scooter horns, voices drifting from balconies, a vendor's rhythmic call.

She loved this sense of manageable chaos: ideas on the page, tea cooling beside her, time unfolding gently.

At noon, her phone lit up. *Can't make it this evening. Something came up at work. I'll call when I can.*

No emoji. No elaboration. Not abrupt — but clipped in a way she wasn't used to from him.

She read it once. Then again. Her fingers moved on instinct. *Of course. Take care.*

She stared at the blinking cursor, then added a smiley. Frowned. Deleted it. Added it again, softer this time. Deleted it once more. She exhaled and sent the message plain.

Afterward, she caught herself waiting — as though the phone might immediately explain what “something” meant. It did not.

She set it down, annoyed with herself for even pausing. *He has a demanding job. You know this. Don't be ridiculous.* But the sentence didn't fully quiet the small prickle under her skin.

At Western Air Command, everything had shifted in minutes.

One moment, officers were mid-lunch, discussing mundane logistics and half complaints. The next, the paging tone cut across the corridor — sharp, unmistakable. Doors opened. Files closed. Conversations snapped off mid-sentence.

The briefing room filled quickly — chairs scraping, boots moving, papers being gathered with quiet urgency. Large screens flickered to life. Maps glowed. Radar tracks dotted the displays. Weather feeds updated in restless loops. Voices dropped, tightened, became economical. Information began arriving in urgent fragments — not dramatic, not theatrical, simply layered and heavy.

A situation developing. Cross-checks in progress. Inter-agency coordination triggered. No room for ambiguity. No room for error.

Kabir stepped in, scanning the board instinctively, his mind sharpening in the way it always did here.

Western Air Command was not theatrical in its operations. There were no speeches. There were timelines, protocols, responsibilities.

He slid into his role where it mattered most – connecting data to decisions, smoothing communication where it naturally snagged, thinking six steps ahead when everyone else was barely on step two.

The familiar switch flipped. Noise became pattern. Pattern became plan.

He confirmed a detail with the weather desk. Clarified airspace coordination with a base commander over secure line. Checked the availability of a support unit that might be needed.

Every sentence was short. Every word mattered more than tone.

He did not think of himself as heroic. The work was something narrower, steadier: remove confusion, minimize risk, ensure the right resources move toward the right urgency.

And under all of it – the unspoken knowledge that decisions made in rooms like this traveled outward into the lives of people who trusted them blindly.

When the immediate phase of briefing ended, he stepped out into the corridor for thirty seconds of air that didn't smell of electronics and tension. His phone was already in his hand before he realized he'd taken it out.

He stared at her name for a moment. He typed: *Out for a bit. Might be hard to reach. Don't worry.*

His thumb hovered. He almost added Promise. He didn't. He read the message once more – measured, careful – then sent it and slipped the phone into his pocket.

As he turned back toward the operations room, he felt the now-familiar dual pull: duty that allowed no negotiation... and the faint ache of leaving a conversation unfinished.

For the first few hours, Aditi barely registered the gap. She answered work emails with her usual deliberateness, occasionally pausing to stretch. She cooked something simple – rice, dal, vegetables – letting the smell of tempering ginger and mustard seeds settle the apartment into evening. She forwarded a photo of the pink-and-gold sunset from her window to her mother, who responded with six heart emojis and a reminder about a cousin's engagement.

Everything was normal. Except, somewhere around late afternoon, the silence grew a different texture. Not ominous. Not dramatic. Just... unfamiliar.

They had not planned to meet that evening. There had been no explicit promise. Yet she realized, with a faint flash of embarrassment, that she had unconsciously shaped the day around the possibility of him — the thought that a message might arrive asking if she had time to walk.

She picked up her phone twice. Put it down twice. *He's busy. Don't turn into that person who needs constant reassurance.*

She made herself tea. The cup warmed her fingers but didn't quite anchor her.

As night thickened, the apartment expanded in strange ways — corners felt farther away, shadows longer. Even the clock tick seemed unnecessarily loud.

She wasn't worried. She understood enough about military life — friends of friends, her own uncle, stories overheard — to know that sudden silences were sometimes simply part of the system. But loneliness didn't negotiate with reason.

This is silly, she told herself gently. You have lived alone for years. You've been fine. One evening shouldn't feel like missing a limb.

And yet — it did. Not dramatically. Not like heartbreak. More like the ghost sensation of something that had begun to fit. Her thoughts drifted — his laugh, the ease with which he made space for other people's stories, the way he poured water for everyone at the table before serving himself. The stray pup's trust in him somehow lingered in her mind more than any grand gesture ever had.

Beneath the warmth, the old warning voice returned. *Careful. You are drifting closer than you planned.*

She curled deeper into the couch, a book open against her knees, the words slipping past unread.

The night pressed in quietly.

At Western Air Command, the hours blurred.

Kabir stood at long consoles, leaning occasionally over someone's shoulder to understand a new feed faster. Phones rang, were answered, were replaced. The map shifted. Weather evolved. Reports were confirmed, then re-confirmed.

Civil coordination calls threaded into military ones. There was no room for imagination — only procedure and judgment.

He reviewed contingency plans, noting weaknesses, shoring them up where possible. Coordinated with a logistics officer about potential requirements. Reviewed clearance corridors. Listened. Decided. Listened again.

Fatigue nudged at the edges of his awareness, but he boxed it neatly and set it aside.

In that small crack between tasks, where the mind briefly loosens before the next demand, an image surfaced — Aditi, half-laughing as she accused him of being “absurdly organized.” The way her face softened when she listened, genuinely interested.

He pressed his palms against the console edge and exhaled once.

Later.

He had trained himself for this compartmentalization — not as denial, but survival. Emotion would be felt in full only when it no longer risked clouding the necessary clarity. For now: focus. For now: precision.

By the time night flowed into a tired grey morning, he had forgotten that the world outside the sealed building was living another rhythm entirely.

The situation — complex, tense — moved gradually into a safer zone. Processes that had been urgent slowed into monitoring. Decisions shifted from immediate to long-range.

Relief didn't come in a rush; it arrived as a collective unwinding — brief, almost invisible. Debrief sessions began. Reports were drafted. Cross-checks again. Lessons recorded in dry language that, if read by anyone outside the system, would sound as dull as a maintenance manual — and yet held stories of near-misses and careful saves inside their lines.

When Kabir finally stepped away, the fatigue sat in his bones like a weight. It was only then — outside in the pale afternoon — that he noticed his phone blinking back to life. Network bars returned. Messages loaded.

Two from her. Both small. Both measured.

Hope everything's okay.

Sleep well when you get the chance.

They did not accuse. They did not pry. They simply acknowledged that she existed at the edge of his world and cared, without demanding entry beyond what he could give.

A smile tugged at his mouth, quiet, unguarded. He felt something inside him loosen — not dramatically, just enough to breathe differently.

He typed: *Back. Sorry for the silence. Was away. Coffee?*

He stared at the word sorry. Deleted it. Wrote it again. Left it. Then sent the message before he could dissect it into meaninglessness.

Her phone buzzed very early in the morning. For a heartbeat, she didn't reach for it — tiredness had numbed everything into a soft blur. But when she saw his name, the fatigue receded in a small, betraying wave.

Relief came first — physical, like unclenching. Then came annoyance at that very relief.

You're not his wife. You're not even sure what you are.

And yet the words that formed on her screen were easy. *I'm glad you're back. Coffee sounds good.*

She placed the phone face-down and lay back, watching shadows drift across the ceiling.

The past day had not shattered her. Nothing catastrophic had happened. Work had continued. Meals had been made. Life had stayed upright.

But something quiet had revealed itself: She had started, without meaning to, organizing her emotional weather around his presence. And that — more than the silence — frightened her.

Late that evening, when they finally met, the world behaved as though nothing had happened. A soft light slanted through the café windows. A barista sang tunelessly. People argued amiably over pastries.

He arrived with that grounded steadiness she had already come to associate with him — but there was a faint layer of exhaustion at the edges, a careful containment, as though parts of him were still cooling down. She noticed — not with anxiety, but with a kind of tenderness that caught her off guard.

They sat. Coffee between them. A glass of water each, as always. He refilled hers without thinking.

She nudged him with a mock-scolding expression. “Unnecessarily considerate, again.”

He grinned, soft around the edges. “Habit.”

They laughed — and their easy rhythm returned, sliding back into its usual groove.

He did not mention Western Air Command beyond a vague “work got complicated.” She did not ask questions she knew he wasn’t allowed to answer.

Instead, they talked about absurd movie details, ridiculous apartment maintenance fees, a neighbor’s dog who had learned to ring the doorbell.

But beneath the surface, something quiet had shifted. For him, the simple act of sitting opposite her felt like the world rebalancing. Not dramatic. Just right. He did not interrogate it. He allowed himself — for once — to rest inside the moment.

For her, warmth returned with unsettling speed — like stepping back into sunlight. The loneliness dissolved, replaced by the familiar, dangerous hum of wanting.

She laughed. She listened. She teased. And inside, a whisper lingered: *This could matter more than you planned.*

The romance continued its quiet simmer — neither proclaimed, neither resisted. And somewhere, quietly, their lives — shaped by entirely different worlds of risk and routine — had begun to edge toward each other, gently, almost imperceptibly...

Irreversibly.

Chapter 4

The invitation went out across the base mess a week before the festival. Not formal — just one of those notices pinned on boards, forwarded on WhatsApp, repeated casually in corridors:

Festival Celebration — Mess Lawns, 1900 hours. Families welcome. Diyas, lights, sweets, and music.

The line at the bottom read, as it always did:

“Attendance encouraged, not compulsory.”

But everyone knew what that meant. Events like these were part duty, part comfort — a way of gathering in a place where life rarely allowed predictable gatherings.

Lanterns. Rows of diyas along the walkway.

Children racing between chairs while officers pretended not to worry about them knocking candles over. Tables stacked with sweets from different parts of the country because everyone insisted *their* hometown made the best version.

It was the kind of evening the Air Force excelled at — half celebration, half act of resilience. A way of saying, We live with uncertainty, but we will not live joylessly.

Aditi didn't really intend to dress up or even go at first. It wasn't that she disliked festivals — she loved them, in fact. But Diwali had learned to wear too many meanings in her life.

Some years, it had been loud laughter and small bursts of glittering chaos. Other years, it had felt like a reminder of absences – of people who should have been there but weren't.

Now, Delhi was home again. She had a rhythm. A job she cared about. Her own apartment with corners that had finally begun to soften into belonging.

And this festival evening – one arranged by the Air Force – felt... adjacent, not central. A place she would go because her uncle had invited her. Because he had said, with that half-stern affection he carried: "Come along, Aditi. It's good to see light where people work in shadows."

So she did come, though she didn't want to admit to herself that she was going for another reason—another person too.

She chose a deep-red saree, simple but elegant – one she had worn before, one that didn't demand attention but still carried quiet grace. She draped it carefully, pinned it with practiced efficiency, then stood back from the mirror and almost didn't recognize herself.

Not glamorous. Not transformed. Just steady. Like someone who could belong at a place like this without pretending.

She drove through familiar Delhi streets – lit with string-lights, bursts of lamps on balconies, brief flashes of small fireworks – and then through the security gates into the base, where celebrations always felt slightly deeper. Like light meant more here.

The mess lawn glowed. Strings of fairy lights looped lazily between trees. Lanterns hung from branches like suspended moons. Diyas flickered along the pathway, their flames trembling in the faint winter breeze.

The faint smell of incense drifted across the grounds, mixing with the unmistakable sweetness of jalebis frying in a temporary outdoor stall.

A group of young officers were arranging diyas – or at least trying to. Their attempts at symmetry dissolved repeatedly into lopsided patterns. Their wives and partners watched, amused, occasionally stepping forward to fix an arrangement without saying anything, restoring balance with a delicate touch.

Music wound through the air – old festival songs, soft percussion, something cheerful without being overwhelming.

Aditi walked beside her uncle, greeting those he introduced her to. There was warmth in these interactions, even where there was reserve — a shared acknowledgement of life lived inside layered realities.

And somewhere, without having seen him yet, she knew Kabir was here. Not certainty — more like the subtle shift in air pressure before rain. A quiet intuition.

Kabir had been on the lawns for nearly half an hour before he noticed her arrive. He had been standing near a makeshift lantern display with his commanding officer, discussing logistics for an upcoming coordination drill. Their conversation was practical — timelines, communication chains, contingencies.

Work rarely truly paused at WAC. It only stepped back slightly, allowing events like this to exist around its edges.

He spoke clearly, concisely — mind focused, voice respectful. And yet, even as he did, his senses stayed attuned to the surroundings the way they always did when he wasn't inside operations.

Noise, laughter, clusters of conversations. Then he saw it: Red. A flicker of saree fabric near the entrance. A familiar posture.

His words trailed for a heartbeat — not audibly, not rudely. Just a microscopic pause inside his own awareness. Then: Aditi.

Something inside him grew very still. Not because she looked stunning — although she undeniably did — but because there was something unguarded about the way she walked through the space.

She wasn't trying to impress anyone. She wasn't anxious. She simply moved with gentle attentiveness — greeting, smiling, stepping aside when a child sped past with a sparkler, laughing with the kid's exasperated mother.

He realized he was smiling before he meant to. He excused himself after a few minutes, not abruptly, not obviously — just enough to create the natural space to cross the lawn.

Their eyes met halfway. Nothing cinematic happened. The music didn't swell. But something subtle shifted — as though the evening had suddenly acquired a center.

He stopped before her, hands in pockets, posture casual. "You clean up well."

Her mouth curved. “So do you.”

He glanced down at his sharply ironed kurta pyjama. Tonight’s dress code was civilian indian attire, the mess committee had said.

“Tailors deserve far more credit than officers,” he said.

They fell into silence — not awkward, just still. Together, they watched a familiar figure race across the lawn. Cirrus — the adopted base dog, wearing a ridiculous bow around his neck — bounded through the swarm of children with patient dignity. When he spotted Kabir and Aditi, he trotted straight over and sat at Aditi’s feet.

Then nudged Kabir gently, as though performing roll call.

She laughed. “We’ve been chosen.”

“Selective loyalty,” Kabir replied, bending to scratch behind the dog’s ears. “He knows who supplies biscuits.”

Their shoulders angled unconsciously towards each other — two people forming a natural space within noise. Neither named it. Neither resisted it.

The evening unfolded in gentle layers. Sparklers appeared. Someone began singing somewhere near the gazebo — a voice unsure at first, then steadier as others joined. Older officers took to storytelling, their anecdotes hovering just safely distant from operational truth.

At a long table draped in maroon cloth, sweets gleamed in neat rows. Aditi wandered toward it and Kabir followed with an entirely unconvincing air of professional curiosity.

“You’re going to judge them,” she said.

“Absolutely. Food is a matter of national integrity.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled. She picked a piece of kaju katli, he reached for a motichoor laddoo, and without thinking, they took bites and exchanged them. As naturally as passing water across a table.

It was only when their fingers brushed lightly that awareness rushed in.

She paused. Not visibly — just internally. How had ease crept this far without asking permission?

He misread the hesitation and gestured to the sweet with mock seriousness. "Too sugary?"

She nodded – relief flooding in at the misinterpretation – even though the sweetness wasn't what had unsettled her.

Later, the Group Captain's voice rose over the mild buzz of conversation. "Diya-lighting at the flag mast."

People formed gentle, uneven rows along the walkway. Children were given the responsibility of carrying candles like sacred treasures. The air settled into a rare quiet – the kind born not from silence but from collective attention.

Aditi knelt to light a diya. Her saree pallu slipped forward – the edge drifting dangerously near the small flame. Before thought could form, Kabir's hand was already there – fingers catching the fabric away from the fire, holding it lightly.

Close enough to feel the warmth of her shoulder. Careful enough to avoid touching skin.

"Careful," he murmured. Soft. Not chastising – protective.

She straightened slowly.

Their faces were closer than necessary – near enough that she could see the faint lines that appeared near his eyes when he smiled, near enough to hear his breath, to feel the faint quiet between heartbeats.

For a flick of a moment, the long simmer burned. Not wildly. Not dangerously. Just undeniably.

He stepped back first. Not abruptly – just enough to break the momentum before it demanded acknowledgment.

She inhaled, steadying. The diya flames danced on, indifferent. Conversation resumed. Children giggled again. Someone shouted for more sparklers. But now, they both carried an echo.

They eventually settled on the edge of the lawn – plates precariously filled with savory snacks, backs supported by a low stone boundary. From here, they could see everything without being inside everything.

He told her mess stories – like the year the power failed and one of the youngest officers improvised magic tricks to keep the children entertained, or

the time someone attempted to release sky lanterns and nearly launched one directly into the commanding officer's car.

Aditi laughed — the kind of laugh that released stored tension.

Then she spoke — a memory of her first Diwali spent truly alone in another city. Of trying too hard to be fine. Of takeaway food and forced movie marathons and the echo of firecrackers against empty walls.

He did something rare then. He didn't fix the moment. Didn't offer bright-side comforts. He just listened — eyes steady, presence anchoring the story into something dignified rather than pathetic.

"Tonight's better," she said eventually.

He turned slightly toward her. "Yes."

She wasn't entirely sure whether he was talking about the festival — or simply about the fact that they were sharing it.

Across the lawn, modest fireworks sparked. Controlled displays rose briefly and fell. Light reflected across her features — momentary bursts of color painting her hair, her eyes, the edge of her smile. Kabir watched — not intensely, not possessively — simply present.

A realization arrived quietly: He liked her here. He liked that she shared this space — not as an outsider visiting, but as someone whose life overlapped with his in real, everyday proximity.

He didn't analyze it. He didn't push it away either. He simply let it exist.

When the evening wound down, chairs moved softly against the grass. Sparklers fizzled out. Someone started stacking plates. Conversations became goodbye murmurs.

They walked toward the parking area together. The path glowed softly beneath the diyas.

"You'll get home okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes."

Instinctively, they slowed — walking slightly behind her uncle's family, stretching out the final moments the way one stretches out pages at the end of a good book.

"Thank you," she said suddenly.

"For what?"

"For tonight. For making it feel like something I belong to. Not just something I'm watching."

He paused — not in confusion, but in care. Then he said gently: "You're not visiting, Aditi."

The words landed deeper than he could have known. Not dramatic. Not possessive. Just invitation — without pressure, without claim.

The Group Captain called her name from across the lot. She turned briefly, acknowledged, then looked back.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight."

He watched her step into the car, saree catching ambient light like another quiet flame.

That night, in her apartment, Aditi sat on the edge of her bed before sleeping.

The festival sounds outside gradually softened — distant fireworks fading into late-night stillness. The loneliness that had crept into her evenings earlier that week did not return.

Instead, something gentler lingered — not certainty, not commitment — just possibility.

If this deepens, she thought, I will eventually have to decide whether I'm brave enough to meet it — instead of stepping back the moment it begins to matter.

She lay down, the echo of festival lamps flickering through memory. Sleep came slowly, but peacefully.

Across the city, in his quarters at the base, Kabir carried a plate of leftover sweets to the table, then drifted out onto the small balcony.

From here, he could see faint trails of light across nearby neighborhoods — houses still glowing in celebration, dogs barking sporadically, a few lanterns floating uncertainly in the night.

He leaned against the railing, arms folded loosely. He felt... content. Not exhilarated. Not lost. Just grounded — as if the world had aligned fractionally more than usual.

He did not know the full shape of Aditi's hesitations. He did not know how carefully she weighed every softening feeling against old, familiar fears of losing herself.

He only knew this: Each time they shared space — whether in conversations or laughter or silence — life felt a shade more balanced.

He stayed like that for a while — letting the night quiet his thoughts — before finally going inside.

The festival had ended. The lights would be taken down tomorrow. But something from the evening would remain — not symbolic, not dramatic — just a steady ember under the surface of both their lives. A warmth they were not yet ready to name. A warmth that refused, quietly and persistently...to disappear.

Chapter 5

Sunday had the soft weight of a page that had finally been turned.

It was late afternoon — that peculiar pocket of time when the light thins and people who aren't in a hurry realize they don't have to be anywhere else. The ceiling fan hummed. Somewhere in the building, a pressure cooker let out a faint, weary whistle.

They were at Aditi's apartment, not doing anything that would make it into a memory on its own.

Aditi sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by a chaotic constellation of papers — manuscript printouts, contracts clipped with tired-looking bulldog clips, edits marked in assertive red, a few sticky notes clinging to the edges like survivors.

She had promised herself — more than once — that she would “organize everything this week.” It was a sentence that sounded bold in her planner and faintly ridiculous in real life.

Kabir lounged on the couch above her, bending over a lamp that had developed a wobble. He was repairing it with a kind of reverent seriousness usually reserved for aircraft or unexploded mines. The toolbox lay open beside him, every screwdriver and wrench lined up as if they were at parade rest.

Soft music played on her old Bluetooth speaker — a playlist she'd put together for “focus,” though today it seemed to be working harder to lull than to energize. The balcony door was open, letting in a mild breeze and the distant sound of a child laughing somewhere in the building courtyard.

The world felt determinedly ordinary.

Aditi groaned suddenly – the long, theatrical kind that came from equal parts frustration and self-awareness. “These forms,” she said, lifting two sheets of paper that looked insultingly similar. “I swear publishing invents paperwork just to watch us suffer.”

Kabir glanced over with polite interest. “What is it?”

“Author royalty acknowledgment forms,” she said, pointing. “And author royalty confirmation forms. Why are these separate? Why are they not the same thing? Why am I – a supposed adult – confused by them?”

He set the lamp down carefully and wandered over, crouching beside her. Up close, the papers looked as tedious as she’d claimed – black text, polite headings, boxes clamoring to be filled in.

He read them for a moment, brows knitting.

“Okay,” he said, after giving the situation a level of focus it clearly did not deserve. “This one’s for internal records. This one’s for the author. And this one—” he tapped a third sheet, “—looks like it was accidentally printed twice and is therefore your enemy. You may destroy it with prejudice.”

She snorted and leaned slightly into him.

“You’re... weirdly good at this,” she said. “Did you secretly intern at a publishing house?”

“I’ve survived government approvals,” he replied dryly. “Once you understand how bureaucratic minds think, everything else is child’s play.”

They sorted for a while together – contracts into one pile, edits into another, mysteries into a hopeful third marked “deal with later.” Their shoulders brushed occasionally, the kind of casual intimacy they no longer had to talk themselves into.

Aditi reached for a folder, misjudged, and sent a small avalanche of paper clips skittering across the floor. She laughed under her breath and let herself drop backward until she rested against the sofa.

“I feel like I’m always chasing things,” she admitted. “Emails, conversations, deadlines... like I’m two minutes behind my own life.”

Kabir didn’t rush to fix the sentiment the way people often did. He considered it. Really considered it.

Then his voice came softer than usual — unguarded, like he'd forgotten to run his thoughts through the usual filters.

"I don't think you're behind," he said. "I think you're carrying a lot — and yet things end up clearer because you touched them."

Her head turned slightly.

He continued, more certain now, "You walk into a mess and it becomes less of a mess. Maybe not instantly. Maybe not dramatically. But steadily. You make worlds more navigable just by being in them."

Something shifted, quiet and definite. It was not dramatic. The fan still hummed. A scooter honked somewhere outside. But the air between them changed texture.

Aditi didn't speak.

She didn't need to. She simply looked at him — and saw not performance, not heroics, not the bravado she'd known other men to hide behind — but calm sincerity, spoken from the middle of an unpretentious truth.

He reached for another stack of forms, as if that were that. And then — almost like a footnote to his own thought — he added, "I love that about you."

There was no drumroll. No crash. Just a sentence that opened and stayed there. Silence, but a gentle one. A silence that felt padded, safe.

Aditi's fingers stilled on the edges of a file. She felt the words settle inside her, like something finding its shelf at last. Her heart didn't race. It expanded.

"You do?" she said.

He met her gaze. No panic. No defensive jokes. No reaching to qualify or take it back. "Yeah," he said simply. "I do."

He left it there — the honesty of someone who had learned to trust timing more than tactics.

Aditi didn't mirror the words. Strangely, she didn't feel like she had failed a test — because it wasn't a test. There was no invisible scoreboard hovering over them.

She reached out and wrapped her fingers around his wrist gently. "Okay," she said.

And in that one word, something opened between them — wider than promise, quieter than certainty — and it felt solid. The lamp still needed fixing. The forms still needed sorting.

Life continued — but with a better fit, as though something that had been slightly crooked had finally clicked.

Kabir left around ten.

He kissed her cheek at the door, unhurried. She watched him walk down the corridor, shoulders relaxed, keys jingling loosely in his hand — a man who had just said something huge and was somehow still the same person.

She didn't go sit dramatically near a window with tragic music. She washed the dishes. She filled the kettle. She made tea.

When she carried the mug to the balcony, the city had dimmed into a patchwork of quiet windows. The laundry on a neighbor's clothesline moved like ghost flags. A cat leaped lightly onto the compound wall and disappeared.

She wrapped a shawl around herself, more out of habit than necessity. His words returned — not insistently, but gently, like lapping waves.

I love that about you.

Not I love you.

Not the cinematic, breath-snatching announcement that shifted entire arcs.

Just: I see you, and here is a truth I'm not afraid to name.

She leaned her head against the balcony grill and watched the streetlight flicker. The thought did not crash. It settled.

Her phone buzzed on the small side table. MOM flashed on the screen.

She hesitated — just a fraction — then answered. "Hi," Aditi said, softening her voice the way she automatically did whenever she spoke to her mother.

"Aditi, did I call too late?" her mother asked. "I was talking to your aunt and lost track of time."

"It's fine," Aditi said. "I'm up."

"What are you doing?"

"Tea. Balcony. Trying to look mysterious to the neighbors."

Her mother chuckled. "For mystery, you need at least a long black shawl and dramatic eyeliner."

"Noted."

There was a pause — the comfortable kind, filled with the sound of long-distance breathing.

"I was thinking," her mother said finally, in that tone that meant she had been rehearsing the line in her head, "you sounded a little tired when we spoke on Thursday."

Aditi let her fingers travel along the rim of the mug.

"I was," she said honestly. "It was a long week at work. A manuscript suddenly fell apart three days before deadline and had to be restructured. We're still fixing things."

"Hmm," her mother murmured, the thoughtful sound that sat somewhere between concern and acceptance. "You push yourself."

"It's publishing," Aditi said lightly. "Chaos disguised as culture."

Her mother laughed — then softened again. "And Kabir? How is he?"

Aditi breathed in. She could choose, right now, to make it smaller, safer: fine, he's fine, everything's the same. She could choose to open the door a crack to a conversation that might grow.

She surprised herself by choosing something in between. "He's... steady," she said. "He tries to fix broken lamps."

"That sounds like a decent quality in a man," her mother said wryly. "Fixing things."

"Yes," Aditi replied. "It is."

There was another pause. Longer. Almost cautious.

"Sometimes," her mother said carefully, "I worry you learned to manage on your own so well that you forget you don't always have to."

The sentence landed gently, not accusing, just true.

Aditi swallowed. "I don't feel... alone," she said. "Not today."

"That's good," her mother said softly. "That's very good."

They shifted to other things then — an update about a cousin's impending wedding, a mild rant about electricity bills, a funny story about the neighbor's parrot that had learned to imitate the pressure cooker whistle.

The ordinary stitched itself around the extraordinary until they looked like one fabric.

Before hanging up, her mother added, almost casually:

"Sleep well, Aditi. And take your time with things. The right feelings don't run away."

After the call ended, the balcony felt larger. Not emptier — larger.

She sat there a while longer, sipping the last of her tea, letting the steam fade into the air.

When she finally went inside, the papers on the living room floor still waited for her. She gathered them into neat stacks without irritation — as if the mess had been downgraded from adversary to puzzle.

She placed the lamp, newly steady from Kabir's repairs, back on the side table and switched it on. Warm light washed the room. No fireworks. No thunderclaps.

Just the soft glow of something honest having entered the room and decided to stay.

She brushed her teeth, set an alarm for the morning responsibilities she had not forgotten, and crawled into bed.

She did not replay every word obsessively. She simply lay there, aware of the quiet shape forming around them — not a cage, not an expectation — but a room being furnished slowly, thoughtfully.

And for the first time in a long while, she felt not like she had to rush toward something or run from it. She felt — held. Sleep came easily.

Outside, the city continued its restless shifting. Dogs barked, elevators hummed, distant traffic murmured on. Inside, a sentence rested, patient and sure, waiting for the morning — I love that about you.

Not everything. Not yet. But enough.

And that, Aditi thought as she drifted, might be how real things begin.

Chapter 6

By Thursday, the Western Air Command grapevine had... feelings.

Not loud ones. This was not a squadron, where rumors arrived in formation, low on fuel and high on drama. Headquarters ran differently. Gossip didn't sprint here — it *walked*, with decent posture. It slipped into sentences like background details and hid politely under phrases such as *just curious* or *for situational awareness*.

The shift began, as shifts often do, so quietly no one noticed until everyone did.

Kabir walked into the ops room with coffee. That, in itself, wasn't unusual.

What *was* unusual was the color of the coffee.

Wing Commander Rao — Deputy Ops, veteran of seventeen postings and ten thousand expressions of professional skepticism — noticed immediately.

"Morning, sir," he said with a touch of irony, watching Kabir stir.

Kabir added milk. Not a lot. Just enough to soften the black.

Rao's eyes narrowed, scientifically. "Well," he asked carefully, "are we experimenting?"

Kabir glanced at his mug. "It's just coffee."

Two analysts looked up from their spreadsheets. Their expressions remained neutral. Internally, they took notes.

He says it's just coffee. This will require further analysis.

The morning update began. Slides advanced. Airspace coordination charts appeared. Someone stumbled over a statistic about sortie readiness, expecting the usual clipped correction.

Kabir corrected.

But the tone carried... air. Not leniency. Kabir didn't *do* leniency. Something else — steadiness without edge.

When an inter-base movement timing didn't quite align, he paused, recalculated, and then added, almost off-hand:

"Good catch on the weather window," he said. "Saved us an hour."

The junior officer blinked as though he had just discovered hidden treasure inside a file. "Thank you, sir."

Kabir nodded, already moving to the next item. "You're welcome."

After he left, the logistics officer whispered, reverently: "He said welcome."

By eleven, theories existed. They did not speak them aloud. Headquarters etiquette did not condone speculating about personal lives unless someone provided PowerPoint.

But the possibilities floated anyway:

- He was sleeping better.
- He'd discovered yoga.
- He was making peace with paperwork.

—or—

He had... *company*.

No one dared say the word.

The ops room, usually made of tension and caffeine, felt subtly rearranged. Conversations softened at the edges. Corrections came with explanations. You could almost hear the collective adjustment of shoulders lowering half a centimeter.

At lunch, Rao watched Kabir answer a message on his phone. A quick light moved through Kabir's expression — the simplest, rarest thing. Ease.

It passed, as all interesting expressions do, and he set the phone aside. But the room had already witnessed it.

Rao leaned back and decided to risk it. "You know," he said mildly, "whoever she is — keep doing what you're doing. Morale is improving."

Kabir took a beat. He might have deflected. Two months ago, he would have. Instead, he acknowledged the sentence like one acknowledges weather.

"She's... good company," he said.

Rao smiled without teeth — the smile of a man who had correctly solved a puzzle.

"Copy that."

No more words. No nudging. Just understanding — the professional kind, the kind that said: *We see a human being under the uniform, and we will not embarrass him about it.*

The week flowed onward. Plans remained complicated. Briefings remained long. Deadlines remained unreasonable.

But the mood of the building — the vast bureaucratic creature Western Air Command actually was — found a calmer rhythm. Work got done. Voices didn't rise as often. Meetings ended closer to the time printed on the schedule.

Sometimes change didn't make noise. Sometimes it just walked in, set down a light somewhere, and left it on.

The text arrived at 7:42 p.m. on Friday, while Aditi was closing her laptop on a manuscript that had made questionable life choices in Chapter Nine.

Kabir: *Night coordination will run late. We usually grab chai on the terrace at Transit afterward. Very unglamorous. Want to come?*

She smiled — because she could hear the subtext: *I'd like you here. But I won't make it dramatic.*

She typed: *Is there samosa?*

A minute later: *There can be.*

Then yes.

She changed out of her “working from home but slightly presentable” outfit into jeans and a kurta that had opinions about embroidery, tied back her hair, and drove toward the quiet side of Delhi where military headquarters exist like secret cities: functional, contained, with their own internal weather.

The guard at the gate checked her ID. Her visitor pass printed with a soft whirr.

She walked in — escorted — past silent lawns and buildings whose windows glowed with bureaucratic insomnia. Somewhere in the distance, a siren sounded, then stopped. The night air carried the faint metallic scent of infrastructure: generators, wiring, possibility.

She had never seen this side of Kabir’s world. Squadrons, she imagined, were loud. This place wasn’t. It was disciplined silence — the sound of decisions that didn’t show off.

The canteen terrace wasn’t romantic, which, Aditi thought, made it perfect. Two long tables. White plastic chairs. Thermos flasks shaped like stubborn penguins. A counter where a man with forearms like tree trunks poured chai into paper cups with the devotion of a priest.

Above them: an enormous spread of sky. Below: the city, dim and distant, respectful of the perimeter walls.

Kabir stood near the railing, talking to a weather officer. His posture — even at rest — carried clarity. He saw her approach and something altered in the angle of his shoulders, invisible to anyone else but obvious to her.

“You found it,” he said.

“You didn’t warn me about the glamorous ambience,” she replied. “It’s overwhelming.”

He grinned. “It gets worse. We also have biscuits that pretend to be food.”

A young flight lieutenant offered her chai. A logistics major added samosas with the reverence usually reserved for sacred relics.

Kabir introduced her simply: “This is Aditi.” Nothing else. Not a resume. Just her.

She liked him for that, fiercely.

“Ma’am,” someone said, politely.

"Please," she replied, "don't call me ma'am. It makes me feel like I should start a motivational Instagram account."

They laughed — cautiously at first, then with real amusement. Headquarters laughter was careful; it knew too many ranks.

The conversation drifted around her — acronyms she didn't fully grasp, moments of humor carved from tension, brief flashes of expertise so casual they almost disguised themselves as regular talk.

She didn't understand everything.

But she understood the connective tissue — how people held each other upright without appearing to, how they managed consequence and chaos with the same weary affection most people applied to house plants.

At one point, someone told a story about a fuel calculation nearly going sideways because a spreadsheet disagreed with reality.

"Sir caught it," the officer said, nodding toward Kabir. "Saved our dignity."

Kabir shook his head. "We triple check because we're human."

Aditi listened, quietly. He didn't posture. He didn't flex. He accepted competence like one accepts gravity — real, present, not requiring applause.

Rao eventually wandered over, hands in pockets. "So," he said conversationally to Aditi, "you're the chai incentive."

She raised a brow. "That's a big responsibility."

"Morale is mission-critical," he said solemnly, then smiled. "He's good, these days."

Her eyes softened. "I know."

No one asked more. No one needed to.

The terrace emptied slowly. People left in twos and threes, sliding back into buildings, back into plans. The thermos flasks stood emptied and heroic. The night widened.

They took the slow route back toward the parking lot, skirting the edge of the parade ground. Lights studded the edges, haloed slightly by mist.

"So?" Kabir asked. "Was it too... headquarters?"

“No,” she said. “It was... interesting. Everyone looks like they’re balancing invisible plates.”

He smiled. “That’s about right.”

“And,” she added, “they think you’re terrifying – but affectionately.”

He laughed softly. “I can live with that.”

They fell into step without effort. The path led past a line of trees that didn’t care about ranks. The soundscape was an odd mixture: crickets, distant traffic, the occasional thud of something practical happening inside a building.

“It’s strange,” Aditi said. “Your world is constantly about big consequences. Mine is full of people having emotional breakdowns over semicolons.”

He thought for a beat. “Both are important,” he said. “One saves lives. The other saves meaning. You’d be surprised how many disasters begin with meaning disappearing.”

She smiled at that – the earnestness, the unintentional poetry. “Was it hard,” she asked, “leaving flying?”

He didn’t answer immediately. He had learned to let questions sit before he approached them. “Yes,” he said finally. “And no.”

She waited.

“I miss the sky,” he continued. “The clarity. The... immediacy. Up there, you’re responsible and also free. Down here, responsibility is slower. It’s made of meetings and signatures and layers of consequence.”

“Do you resent it?”

He thought again. “I respect it,” he said. “Sometimes more than I like it. But it matters. And maybe—” He hesitated. “Maybe it’s good for me not to be defined by the loudest thing I’ve ever done.”

She exhaled slowly. “I like you like this,” she said. “You’re... grounded.”

They reached her car. Neither of them rushed goodbye.

“Thank you for coming,” he said.

“Thank you for samosa,” she replied. “I am not an easy woman to lure.”

He opened the door for her — not theatrically, simply out of habit. “You’re good company,” he said, almost to himself.

She paused, one foot inside, and met his eyes. “So are you.”

He closed the door gently.

As she drove away, she glanced in the mirror and saw him stand there for a moment longer than necessary, hands in pockets, looking — oddly — like someone who had arrived somewhere without moving.

Aditi reached home close to midnight. She kicked off her shoes, poured water, and sat in the quiet living room with the kind of fullness that wasn’t dramatic — just steady.

She thought of the terrace, of the officers with their careful laughter, of the way Kabir’s presence had rippled outward through that building without announcement.

She thought of herself beside that world — not overshadowed, not lost — simply... present.

Her phone buzzed. Kabir: *Next time, I’ll upgrade the biscuits.*

She smiled, typed back: *Ambitious.*

He sent a single emoji — the smiling one that never tried too hard — and that was that.

She leaned her head back against the couch. No fireworks. No breathless declarations. Just a chapter quietly sliding into place, joining the ones before it.

And somewhere inside Western Air Command, another late briefing ended five minutes early. Not because the work had vanished.

Because the man at the center of the map had remembered how to carry weight without becoming it. Small days. Quiet shifts. The kind that rearrange a life without warning you in advance.

Chapter 7

It happened on a night that didn't plan to be important.

They'd made dinner together — actual cooking, not ordering — which meant mild chaos, a burnt pan, and Kabir looking very betrayed by a stubborn onion. They ate at the table, then drifted to the couch, a movie playing lazily in the background, more sound than story.

Aditi tucked her feet under her, settling into the cushions. Kabir sat beside her, one arm draped along the back of the sofa. Their conversation wandered — work, childhood vacations, the neighbor who watched TV loudly, the junior flying officer who sang beautifully at midnight.

Minutes passed in a quiet, easy rhythm. At some point, her head found his shoulder. Not deliberately. Just... comfortably.

He adjusted slightly so she could rest better, his hand brushing her hair. The touch lingered — gentle, curious, not demanding. It was, for the first time, entirely certain. He felt her breathe, felt her relax.

Minutes passed like that, quiet and easy.

Then she shifted, turning to face him. They were suddenly closer than usual — too close for small talk, not close enough to be anything else yet. She studied him, not shy, not bold — just present, her gaze lingering on the sharp line of his jaw and the softness in his eyes.

"You're staring," he said lightly.

"I'm deciding something," she answered.

He smiled, but it softened quickly into something steadier. "About?"

"About trust," she said. "And about tonight. And about you."

He didn't move toward her or away. He simply nodded, as if acknowledging instructions before takeoff. "Okay," he said quietly. "You're in control of this one."

The room felt warmer, not with tension — with safety. She leaned forward and kissed him.

It wasn't urgent. It wasn't cautious either. It was honest — a kiss that said *I know who you are, and I still want to be here*. He responded gently, following her pace, matching the softness rather than trying to lead it. It was deep, demanding—a passionate breach that tore through the months of attraction, the longing glances across rooms, and the "almosts" finally caught up to them. It was tender; yet it was a hungry, desperate claim, a physical commitment to tear down the walls between them.

Kabir was momentarily stunned, but the dam of his pent-up feelings finally shattered. He gripped her waist, pulling her flush against him, returning the kiss with a raw intensity that mirrored his wanting and desperate desire. This was not about simple pleasure; it was a violent collision, a frantic, primal need for possession and emotional ownership, searching for the undeniable reality of her presence through sensation.

Kabir broke the kiss, his voice a low, husky growl against her mouth, charged with a vulnerable need. "I want you... you have no idea how much I have wanted you."

"I am right here," Aditi breathed, a gasp of relief mixing with fierce commitment. "Nothing is stopping us."

Time stretched. The world outside faded.

When they paused, foreheads touching, both a little breathless though nothing hurried had happened, she whispered: "Stay?"

He searched her face — not for permission, but for certainty. "Only if you're sure," he said.

She nodded, smiling a small, grounded smile. "I am. Not because it's dramatic. Because it feels right."

Surprising her with his strength, he slid his hands down to her thighs and lifted her. She parted her legs, welcoming Kabir as he renewed his kisses.

They moved slowly from the couch to the bedroom. Aditi tugged his shirt up and over his head running her hand over his lean muscles. Then bang! There was laughter – real laughter – when he bumped his knee on the bed, and let out an expletive.

“Fearless in the sky, clumsy on land,” she teased.

“Occupational hazard,” he muttered, grinning.

Touch became conversation – careful, attentive, asking and answering without words. He kept checking in with his eyes. She kept answering with hers. He whispered her name. Aditi clung to him, clawing into his back, feeling delirious, wondering if this was real or if she’s making a mistake. Kabir pulled her top over head, kissing her bare shoulders and the curve of her throat. His stubble scratched her as he went, sending a pleasant shiver up her spine.

“Ow” she said. “You need a shave”

He grinned and returned his scratchy kisses to a sensitive spot on her neck as he teased off the rest of her clothes. Kabir trailed his thumb over Aditi’s cheek, coming to rest on her lips. She caught it between her teeth, thrilled with the hungry way he looked at her.

“I’ve waited months for this, Aditi. I’m not going to rush it.”

He kissed her again, passionate but slow. His tongue met hers in sensual movements, his hands roaming over her body. He laid his fingers inside the cup of her bra. He kissed Aditi as he teased her breast, his other hand slipping inside her panties.

Aditi tried to grind against him, but he held back, teasing her with light touches until she was writhing desperately. Kabir’s face lit with laughter and desire. Running one strong hand up her thigh he nudged her legs open. Before she knew it, Kabir moved up the bed in a single movement, covering Aditi with his body as his mouth took hers.

All restraint gone, Kabir surged against her again and again as Aditi opened up him, wrapping her legs tightly around him, pulling him closer. She gasped, “yes...oh my god...I’m going to...”

Pleasure exploded through her body at the same moment as Kabir was overtaken by his own ecstasy.

Kabir collapsed on top of her as she ran her fingers through his hair, their breathing gradually slowing as the sweat dried on their skin.

Nothing about it was perfect. Which made it perfect.

Later, they lay on their sides, facing each other, the room hushed. No dramatic declarations. No sweeping orchestral emotions.

Just breathing. Just warmth.

He brushed a stray strand of hair from her cheek.

"You're okay?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "More than okay."

She tucked closer, fitting into the space between his shoulder and chest as if it had always waited for her.

He held her — not possessively, not protectively — simply because holding her felt natural.

Sleep came slowly. Not because they were afraid to close their eyes.

But because neither of them wanted to miss the quiet.

Sunlight slipped in through the curtains before either of them fully woke.

Aditi stirred first, blinking at the ceiling, then at the quiet shape beside her. For half a second she had that instinctive *oh*, the one that usually came with panic or second-guessing.

But there was no panic.

Just Kabir, still asleep, one hand loosely resting near her shoulder like it had arrived there by memory rather than intention.

He woke a moment later — eyes opening, registering the room, registering her — and then he smiled. Not because he thought he should. Just because it was a good morning.

"Hi," he said, voice scratchy.

"Hi," she replied.

Silence — not uncomfortable, just warm.

He glanced toward the window. "We survived the night. No structural damage. Everything in tact."

She snorted. “Congratulations, Squadron Leader. A flawless mission.”

He shifted slightly, propping himself on one elbow. “You okay? Anything hurts?”

“Very,” she said honestly. “And a little hungry. And nothing hurts.”

He nodded, relieved. “Good. Hunger I can work with.”

They lay there for a few more minutes, not clinging, not overanalyzing — just existing. Then, with mutual unspoken agreement, they got up. She tied her hair, he found his shirt — the ordinary domestic choreography of morning.

In the kitchen, he attempted breakfast. Attempted.

“What is this?” she asked, peering into the pan.

“An omelette,” he said confidently.

“That is scrambled eggs.”

“Creative interpretation,” he countered. “Air Force improvisation.”

She leaned against the counter, smiling — amused, soft, *comfortable*. He brushed past her to reach for plates, and the casual touch didn’t feel like an escalation.

It felt like continuity.

They ate at the table, knees brushing, conversation easy — about work schedules, about the neighbor’s noisy scooter, about tea being a human right.

No speeches. No “what does last night mean?”

Because, somehow, they both already knew.

They drifted into the rest of the morning with the unhurried calm of people who didn’t want to jinx something fragile by naming it too loudly. Kabir rinsed mugs. Aditi wiped crumbs off the table. It felt domestic in a way that should have terrified her.

Instead, it grounded her.

He caught her watching him and raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing,” she said, but the word carried a smile. “Just... you’re neat.”

“That’s the worst compliment I’ve ever received.”

She laughed, and it loosened something further. “Fine. You’re... reliable.”

He paused, towel in hand. There it was—the word that had chased him through his twenties and early thirties, always tinged with obligation. But coming from her, it sounded like steadiness. Like safety.

“Reliable is good,” he said quietly.

He set the towel aside and leaned back against the counter, studying her with that careful attention he had—the kind that didn’t trap, only included. “You’re thinking,” he added.

“I’m always thinking,” she replied. “It’s exhausting, actually.”

“Want to let me carry ten percent of it?”

She tilted her head. “Limited carrying capacity?”

“I’m rated only up to moderate turbulence.”

They stood there, the joke fading into something gentler. The hum of the fridge, the distant bark of a dog downstairs, someone clanging utensils in another flat—morning noise, ordinary and anchoring.

“I didn’t wake up afraid,” she said, almost to the sink, almost to herself.

He absorbed that. “Good,” he said simply. No heroics. No triumphant declaration. Just good.

She moved closer, resting her hip by the corner of the counter, facing him. “If I do — on some other morning — you’ll...”

“I’ll be exactly as unexciting as I was today,” he replied. “We’ll talk. Or not. Tea first. Whatever you want.”

Her lips curved. “You really sell romance differently, you know.”

He pretended to consider this. “Field-tested.”

Silence again, not heavy—just thick with the knowledge that a line had shifted quietly overnight. He reached up, brushing a loose strand of hair away from her cheek. His fingers barely grazed her skin, and even that was careful, patient.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

She nodded, surprised at how easy it felt to say, “Yes.”

He didn’t rush the moment. The closeness arrived the way sunlight does—gradually, then all at once. She could feel his breath, warm, tinged faintly with tea. When he kissed her, it wasn’t a victory or a claim. It was acknowledgment.

Soft. Present. A question with an answer they shared.

She kissed him back, with quiet certainty.

When they parted, she stayed close, forehead resting against his. “We should get on with the day,” she murmured, though neither of them moved.

“Operationally, yes,” he said. “Emotionally, I’m filing for an extension.”

She nudged his shoulder, amused. “What time do you have to leave for WAC?”

“Late morning. Briefing’s short.” He hesitated. “Text when I reach?”

“Please do.”

They migrated to the living room, gathering their things with that half-distracted energy of people reluctant to disperse a bubble. She slipped on her watch. He found his keys, misplaced them, found them again exactly where he’d left them.

At the door, he paused.

Not out of doubt—out of recognition. Of the fact that this was not a pause-and-pretend moment. This was a step into something that would shape the days ahead.

“Last night,” he said softly, “didn’t feel like a beginning.”

“No?”

He shook his head. “It felt like... arriving somewhere we’d been walking toward for a while.” He smiled—slow, affectionate. “And let’s keep walking. Steady speed. No dramatic maneuvers.”

She looked at the opened door, sunlight pooling in the corridor. “Squadron Leader,” she said lightly, “you and your metaphors.”

He gave a small bow. “It’s what we do.”

They exchanged one more brief, unhurried kiss—less discovery this time, more promise—then stepped into the day, each carrying the quiet certainty that whatever came next wasn’t fragile fantasy.

It was, finally, something they both felt ready to hold.

Chapter 8

It didn't become fireworks.

It became simpler.

There was no single conversation where the ground shifted. No moment that could be pinned to a calendar. The change came like weather — almost invisible while it happened, impossible to miss once it had settled.

They still teased each other in the way only people who feel safe do — lightly, fondly, and often, still argued about food in ways that were at least half-silly on purpose: whether coriander belonged in anything, whether chai needed exact timing or instinct.

They still sent messages late at night about absurd writing, ridiculous bureaucratic memos, the small comic tragedies of everyday life.

But beneath the surface, something had rearranged.

Touch grew quieter. A hand brushed the small of her back as he crossed the kitchen. She smoothed the collar of his shirt without thinking. Their goodbyes turned into soft kisses, not as event, not as punctuation, but as habit. Casual closeness that didn't require decision, didn't demand interpretation.

None of it required discussion. None of it asked permission from language.

Honesty followed the same pattern. Instead of swallowing tiredness and pretending enthusiasm, they started saying simple sentences: "I'm tired." "I'm irritated." Can we just... not talk for five minutes?"

And those sentences no longer carried the fear that honesty might break something. They sounded like truth. And truth didn't threaten the structure. It reinforced it.

Performance thinned out, almost without them noticing. He no longer tried to be endlessly composed. She no longer tried to be endlessly agreeable. They discovered there was a way to be together that didn't demand constant work.

One evening, Kabir came over after a long day — the kind of day that had been full of meetings, paperwork that multiplied rather than reduced, and the low-grade mental buzzing of responsibility. He didn't bring conversation or charm with him.

He just walked in, toed off his shoes, dropped onto the couch, and sighed — a long, uncomplicated exhale.. Not a polite sigh. A real one — the kind that seemed to leave the bones lighter.

Aditi made tea. She placed the mug in his hands. She didn't ask what had happened. She didn't fuss. She simply sat.

He looked at the mug, then at her. "I like this," he said.

"What?"

"That I don't have to be interesting."

Her smile was warm, faintly amused. "I like that you don't try."

He laughed softly, and with that laugh the last layer of the day fell away. His shoulders adjusted — not slumped, not braced — just honest.

He drank his tea.

They watched television without really watching. They talked about nothing. Somehow, in the absence of effort, intimacy expanded.

The shift showed up again in unexpected places — like the afternoon they realized they had run out of milk.

"You forgot," she said.

"You forgot to remind me," he replied.

They stared at each other — mock-serious. And then both burst out laughing.

They went together to buy milk. It turned into a miniature outing. They walked into the small grocery store down the street, where the shelves were arranged

according to the owner's personal logic rather than any identifiable system. He carried the basket. She reached absentmindedly for coriander.

He wrinkled his nose. "It tastes like soap."

"You're wrong," she replied calmly. "And ignorant."

They debated biscuits at length — he insisted chocolate cream was unnecessary chaos, she argued that life required joy.

At the checkout, Kabir realized — with a soft, surprising clarity — that none of this felt like the aftermath of some big emotional milestone. It was rhythm. And rhythm was steadier than passion had ever promised to be.

One night, she fell asleep mid-sentence.

They had been talking, the loose, nighttime kind of talking that stretched and curled around older memories, future hopes, and nonsense. She was halfway through describing a colleague's spectacularly misguided presentation when her voice slowed, blurred, disappeared.

Kabir watched her for a moment — not with worship, not with analysis, but with the quiet curiosity reserved for things that matter. He reached for the blanket folded neatly at the chair's back. He draped it over her carefully, smoothing it once along the edge out of some instinct older than words.

Then he sat back down beside her and opened his book. He didn't dramatize the tenderness. He didn't imagine its meaning. He simply lived inside it.

In the morning, she noticed the blanket and smiled — not at the gesture itself, but at its consistency. Because it meant there was someone in the room who moved gently around her sleeping self. A new kind of reassurance was forming, one that had nothing to do with intensity, and everything to do with steadiness.

They didn't transform into different versions of themselves. They became themselves more comfortably — which, it turned out, was the more radical thing.

They learned how to disagree without turning arguments into verdicts. They talked. They got frustrated. They paused. They returned. It felt like navigation. Two people trying to steer the same boat, not win separate races.

It didn't begin heroically. It began, as so many lessons do, with something unremarkable: a conversation that slipped sideways into annoyance.

He thought something at work required patience. She thought it required confrontation. Their voices sharpened. Silence arrived, awkward and too loud. The familiar fork in the road appeared — pride in one direction, retreat in the other.

They chose neither. They waited.

Then they spoke again — slower. They revised. They apologized. They re-entered the conversation as people, not opponents. Somewhere in that recalibration, Aditi realized friction didn't automatically mean fracture. Arguments could be navigation.

They were learning the map of each other — where the soft parts were, where the stubborn corners lived — and instead of fearing those places, they began to treat them with a practical sort of respect.

This is how people who plan to stay talk, she thought. Not to win. To keep building.

Some evenings were deeply quiet — the kind where an hour slipped by with both of them working on separate things, the room filled only with the fan's hum and the occasional clink of a spoon against a mug.

There was no pressure to fill the air. It felt startlingly intimate, that silence — the kind not born of avoidance, but of trust.

On nights like those, Kabir sometimes found himself feeling oddly grateful for the absence of drama. He had known intensity before — the kind that burns loudly and collapses on itself. This was not that. This belonged to another category entirely — closer to endurance, closer to shelter.

He didn't say any of this aloud. But he carried the awareness with a quiet, almost private awe.

Aditi noticed her own changes not as declarations, but as absences. She noticed she no longer rehearsed difficult conversations ahead of time. She noticed how she didn't instantly scan his words for hidden meanings. She noticed that when he was late, her first thought wasn't worry or resentment — it was curiosity.

She also noticed the gentleness with which he guarded ordinary moments. He didn't text constantly. He didn't insist on claim or proof. Instead, he showed up — at the end of days, in small gestures, in the invisible maintenance work

of affection. He remembered the way she liked her tea when she was anxious. He left space for her silences. He made room.

And perhaps because neither of them rushed toward labels, the relationship settled into shape without cracking under expectation. They didn't tell many people. They didn't announce. They simply existed — and gradually, inevitably, the people who mattered saw it for themselves.

They saw it in Aditi's ease.

They saw it in the way Kabir had begun to carry his responsibilities with less strain and more steadiness — not because life had grown easier, but because something behind it had grown firmer. And gradually, the circle widened — gently, like ripples.

Sometimes, Aditi thought back — to earlier versions of herself, to earlier equations where love felt like a test she was constantly at risk of failing. She remembered the hyper-vigilance, the breath held in anticipation of disappointment.

She could recognize now, with a clarity that carried neither bitterness nor nostalgia, the fundamental loneliness inside those older stories. This one wasn't lonely.

Even when Kabir wasn't there, the connection didn't feel suspended — it felt present, like a house one could return to. And that, she understood, was the real difference.

She didn't feel watched. She felt seen. It was a new feeling for her.

They had no rituals — at least none they named. But some began to form anyway.

Sunday mornings often started slowly, with the ridiculous ritual of “the perfect toast” — his standard of crispness, her insistence on butter reaching all the corners. Rainy evenings meant soup. Tea was practically a third character, entering whenever emotions rose too high or too low, or when there was nothing even.

And sometimes, without meaning to, they found themselves reflecting in quiet, sideways ways — like the evening Kabir said, while drying his hands at the sink, “I didn't know normal could feel like this.”

She didn't ask what he meant. She simply nodded, because she understood — not intellectually, but with the warm certainty that comes from mirror-recognition.

This wasn't exhilaration. This was safety — and safety, they were discovering, had its own kind of beauty.

The rest of the world, inevitably, began responding to that stability, though neither of them tried to orchestrate it.

Friends who once watched Aditi closely stopped asking certain questions. They texted her "Keep him. He looks at you like you're the destination, not the entertainment."

People at the base — perceptive in the way communities are — adjusted naturally around the fact that Kabir left on time more often and sometimes smiled at nothing in particular. He didn't talk about Aditi. He didn't have to. His men had served under him long enough to read his silences more fluently than his sentences.

Nobody applauded. Nobody speculated. They simply allowed it — the way a formation eases when spacing finally feels right, as if it had always been planned that way.

And perhaps that was the most accurate understanding of it — not drama, not anything that required acknowledgment. But stability. Weight within limits. Something cleared to stay.

There were still difficult days.

There were moments when they misunderstood each other, when old fears knocked quietly, when exhaustion made everything feel more fragile than it actually was.

But those moments didn't sit alone anymore. They lived inside a wider, steadier landscape — one defined less by intensity and more by trust.

And slowly, quietly, without ceremony or signature, they became two people who had — at last — a place to land. It felt like the ordinary miracle of belonging. They had found — in the middle of everyday routines — something that wasn't dramatic and wasn't fragile. Something that didn't demand attention. Something like rhythm. Something like belonging.

Something, finally, like home.

Chapter 9

The base always smelled faintly of jet fuel, eucalyptus trees, and something indefinably metallic — like old rain. Aditi had grown up visiting it often enough that the soundscape had become familiar: the periodic thrum of aircraft in the distance, the clipped echo of boots on parade ground, someone shouting instructions with a voice that had learned authority rather than inherited it.

It should have felt imposing.

Today, it just felt like her uncle's home — the place with the stubborn hibiscus plant gamely producing two flowers, the doormat that always curled on one corner, and the living room curtains that her aunt swore were the “exact shade of patience.”

She slipped off her sandals at the door and walked into the living room, automatically scanning for her aunt. The TV was paused, a news anchor frozen mid-gesture. The ceiling fan turned lazily. Somewhere in the kitchen, something simmered, fragrant and familiar — her aunt's dal that had never tasted the same twice and somehow always tasted right.

“Aditi?” called her aunt.

“In the kitchen.”

Her aunt came in with that unhurried walk of hers — the one that made it look as though she had all the time in the world and was perpetually amused by the idea that anyone might think otherwise. She carried her own cup of tea, the rim slightly chipped.

“You're very silent,” she observed, not probing — merely noticing, like a naturalist cataloguing birds.

Aditi reached automatically for the rolling pin and the bowl of french beans. "Am I?"

"You hum when you're fine. You over-salt when you're distracted. You're doing neither." Her aunt blew on her tea. "Which means: thoughts."

Aditi hesitated. "Kabir said something the other day."

Her aunt did not immediately react. She didn't widen her eyes or lean in. She simply allowed the silence to gather between them – a bowl placed between question and answer.

"He said he loved... something about me," Aditi said slowly. "Not the whole grand thing. Just – how I look at the world. And it didn't feel like pressure. It felt like... recognition."

Her aunt's smile deepened into the tea.

"That's how the good ones sound," she said. "They don't arrive with fireworks. They arrive like furniture – and suddenly the room makes more sense."

Aditi laughed softly. "That sounds terribly unromantic."

"It's deeply romantic," her aunt corrected. "It means he's looking at you, not a dream he hung your face on."

The sentence settled into the kitchen like additional light.

Aditi rolled the dough slower.

"I'm not ready to say it back yet," she admitted. "But I'm not afraid of it."

"Then don't rush," her aunt said. "Good rooms don't collapse if you take your time sitting in them."

They drank in companionable silence. The evening stretched out, full of space rather than tension.

Then her aunt set her cup down with a faint, decisive click. "How about you invite him for dinner tonight?"

Aditi blinked. "No. Absolutely not. No."

Her aunt tilted her head thoughtfully, like someone considering wallpaper. "Your uncle knows him. I know him. We will be gracious and ordinary. It will be like feeding a nice neighbour. Only with slightly more scrutiny."

“Aunty—”

But her aunt had already turned, leaving the kitchen with the quiet decisiveness of someone who collects plans the way other people collect teaspoons. By the time Aditi followed, she could already hear voices from the living room.

Her uncle — Group Captain Nihal Singh — was reading a report on his tablet. He glanced up. Her aunt spoke as if this had been discussed at length with multiple committees..

“He’s coming for dinner,” she said, in a tone that made it sound established, centuries-old fact, ““If he cannot survive dinner, he cannot survive life,”

Nihal looked completely bewildered. He lifted one eyebrow. “My dear Pammi! Who is?”

Aditi opened her mouth, “I didn’t—”

“Kabir. That boy is decent,” her aunt continued. “And if he runs away from one dinner, he’s not right for our girl anyway.”

“I am not—” Aditi tried again.

Nihal Singh looked at his wife, then at his niece, then somewhere middle distance where practical decisions live.

“What time?” he asked.

Her aunt smiled, triumphant but gentle. “Seven-thirty. Call him.”

Nihal Singh reached for his phone with the same calm efficiency he used for official briefings.

Aditi stared, mildly horrified.

Her aunt patted her arm. “Breathe. You like breathing. We must feed people we’re curious about. It reveals them.”

Kabir was sitting at his desk when the call came — a file open in front of him, a pen balanced between his fingers, the half-empty coffee he would later forget to finish cooling by inches. He recognised the number immediately.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Kabir. You’re free tonight?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Come for dinner. Seven-thirty. Nothing formal. Just family.”

Kabir paused – not out of reluctance, but because he knew what this invitation meant and did not take it lightly. He swallowed.

“Yes, sir. I’d be honoured.”

After they hung up, he sat still for a moment, then laughed at himself quietly. His shoulders dropped. He let the reality roll through him – not quite panic, not quite exhilaration, something steadier.

He texted Aditi.

Your uncle invited me for dinner tonight.

A pause.

My aunt invited you. My uncle merely formalised it.

They spoke briefly on the phone.

“It’s not a big thing,” she said. “Just my uncle and aunt. No interrogations. Probably.”

“Define ‘probably’.”

“They’ve promised to behave.”

“Then they absolutely won’t.”

But he still said yes.

He arrived with sweets – the simple kind wrapped in unapologetically bright paper. The kind that tasted like childhood. He’d deliberated longer than he’d care to admit – flowers? Too much. Fruit? Too formal. Sweets felt safe. Human. Home.

He stared at the doorbell for a second longer than necessary, then pressed.

Aditi opened the door wearing a soft, unshowy kurta and an expression that was equal parts reassurance and amusement.

“Relax. This is not a test.”

He exhaled. “Noted.”

Her aunt appeared with theatrical mildness, flour on her hand like decoration.

"Hello, Kabir. We've heard absolutely nothing about you, which means you must be important."

Aditi groaned, "What—"

Kabir grinned. "That's the most reassuring thing anyone's said to me all week."

He handed the sweets. Her aunt peered in, approving. "Correct. Nostalgia. The most polite form of bribery."

They moved into the living room. The furniture had the quiet dignity of things chosen for utility first and sentiment after. Family photographs lined the wall — ceremonies, postings, a wedding picture where her uncle looked alarmingly young and intensely determined.

Nihal Singh stood by the bar trolley — the older kind with wheels that squeaked if pushed too quickly. "Whisky?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Neat is fine."

The first sip burned in that pleasant way that felt like honesty. They talked — real work, not resume work. Training pressures. Resource juggling. Men who needed coaxing more than commanding. Kabir spoke cleanly, without adornment.

Nihal listened, weighing calmness, not credentials. It wasn't suspicion; it was assessment. Years of commanding men had etched that habit into him — weighing steadiness, checking for ego's sharp edges. He poured another half-finger.

Meanwhile, the kitchen had become theatre. Aditi's aunt was orchestrating chaos with cheerful precision.

"And anyway," she was saying, waving a spoon for emphasis, "I've been telling your mother for months that bright red would look far better on you than that timid blush pink nonsense. With your skin tone? Please. Tragedy."

"Aunty—"

"And the blouse cut matters more than people think. Most tailors behave like we are nuns. We'll go shopping. Your mother and I. We'll need to finalise your trousseau. Also, your Kabir should wear cream. Not white. White is for hospitals."

Aditi blinked. "We are not—"

Her aunt was already somewhere else in the monologue — necklines, sari borders, a passing anecdote about a cousin's wedding she'd accidentally improved. She turned to the pickle jar, deeply satisfied with the order of the universe.

The oven timer beeped only because it felt left out.

Dinner was unfussy and abundant. Kabir noticed — the way the dal was refilled before the bowl was empty, the stack of rotis that appeared with quiet regularity, the slight pride her aunt had in the lemon pickle that she “wasn't sure had turned out” (it had, gloriously).

He didn't lean into charming. He asked questions. He listened. He told stories without exaggeration.

And somehow, that was the thing that landed. Laughter surfaced, then subsided, like waves that knew their place.

Group Captain Nihal Singh didn't say much. But he kept passing dishes Kabir's way.

Aditi's aunt topped his plate again without asking. “You're too thin for responsibility.”

That, in itself, felt like approval.

After dessert — when conversation thinned into comfortable pauses — her uncle finally spoke. “What I like,” he said, not unkindly, “is that you don't talk like a man who wants to impress.”

Kabir didn't deflect. “I'm too tired to maintain personas,” he said lightly. “What you see is how I really am.”

Nihal studied him for a long moment, then nodded. “Good. We don't have time for unnecessary drama.”

Aditi hid a smile in her teacup.

Later, on the balcony, they watched the base loosen into night. A radio far away played a song that sounded as if it had always existed.

“That went well,” she said.

He thought for a second. “Your aunt wants to send me home with five containers.”

"That's affection in Tupperware."

"Then I'm honored," he said. "And slightly intimidated."

They stood without filling the silence. The air had that softness just before sleep finds buildings.

He spoke first. "I didn't expect... this."

"What, my aunt planning our wardrobes?"

"No." He shook his head. "I mean — the ease. Your uncle. The dinner. It didn't feel like an exam."

"It wasn't," she said. "It was... observation. Which is worse, sometimes."

He chuckled.

Then she added, more carefully, "He liked you."

"I could tell when he didn't correct me."

She bumped his shoulder gently. "Welcome to family."

They didn't discuss future labels. They didn't narrate what this meant. Something warm — and frightening — flickered between them.

He leaned his arms on the railing. "I don't know what all this becomes," he said, honest, not dramatic. "But I know I don't feel like I'm performing around you."

She let that sit. They didn't define anything. They didn't test the moment for durability. They let it breathe.

Inside, her aunt was humming to herself, stacking plates, occasionally muttering about blouse cuts and the tragedy of bad tailoring. Her uncle rinsed glasses with methodical movements — the kind of man who believed in doing small things properly because it trained the muscle for bigger things.

Life continued — and Kabir had stepped inside it without creating ripples that broke things.

Aditi watched him, not with dazzled awe, but with something steadier. He wasn't fireworks.

He was furniture.

And suddenly, the room made more sense.

They lingered on the balcony until her aunt's voice floated through the sliding door: "Children, it is not nice to stand like furniture. Good people help their elders."

Aditi rolled her eyes. "Translation: she wants to pack leftovers."

They stepped back inside. Her aunt was already at the dining table with surgical precision, spooning dal and sabzi into Tupperware. "You must take food," she said to Kabir, with grave seriousness. "Otherwise the universe thinks we failed as hosts."

"I really don't—"

She pressed two boxes into his hands, then added a third, reconsidered, removed the third, and nodded to herself. "Two is sensible. Three is desperation."

Kabir laughed. "Thank you."

She stood on tiptoe — not quite a hug, not quite not — and patted his arm instead. "You drive carefully. And don't think too much. Overthinking gives wrinkles."

Nihal emerged from the kitchen, drying his hands. "Goodnight, Kabir."

"Goodnight, sir."

There was the faintest pause.

"Come again," Nihal added, as if mentioning weather.

The words sat between them like a small endorsement, quietly stamped.

Outside, the air was cooler. The lamps cast long, patient shadows across the driveway. Aditi walked him to the gate.

They didn't hold hands. They didn't stand too close. But something in the air between them had shifted — less wondering, more knowing.

"Goodnight," she said, softly.

"Goodnight."

"We'll meet soon," she added. "I'll call."

"Okay."

They didn't hug – and somehow, it felt natural. It was *restraint*, chosen and mutual.

He lifted the Tupperware slightly, half-smiling. "I'm now officially family-adjacent."

She grinned. "Welcome to the suburbs of belonging."

He laughed, shook his head, and walked to the car.

The road unfurled quietly beneath the headlights. Kabir drove without music. Not because he was brooding – but because the night felt like something that deserved to be heard. The hush, the occasional dog wandering across the road, the warm smell of food beside him.

He replayed moments without analysing them: Her uncle pouring that second half-finger of whisky. The unhurried conversations. Her aunt speaking in bright, looping thoughts that somehow landed perfectly where they needed to. Aditi, watching, occasionally smiling to herself – as if something inside her had stopped fighting.

He expected anxiety – the kind that came after significant evenings. Instead, what he felt was... *alignment*. No fireworks. No cinematic declarations.

Just the clean, solid sense that he had stepped into a space where nothing demanded performance.

At a traffic light, he glanced at the Tupperware on the passenger seat. Approval, domesticated and sealed with lids.

He smiled. He thought briefly – not of weddings, not of futures, not of names. Just of the week ahead.

Of tea. Of another evening where nothing dramatic would need to happen and everything important quietly would.

He didn't feel triumphant. He felt steady.

And, for the first time in a long time, that felt like the right direction.

He turned the car toward home, carrying with him the soft weight of a night that had asked nothing and given more than it announced.

Chapter 10

Aditi's flat smelled of garlic and roasting cashew nuts.

It was a simple, comforting scent that always settled her nerves—the kind that wrapped itself around her like a shawl pulled tight against an evening chill. It was not the smell of spectacle or celebration. It was the smell of continuity. Of evenings that ended quietly and mornings that began without drama. Of routine, repetition, and a life that built itself one small, steady gesture at a time.

She stood at the stove, stirring the chicken curry with a wooden spoon that had a slight burn mark along the handle, a relic from a past kitchen mishap. Steam rose in languid curls, carrying with it the deep, earthy aroma of freshly ground spices. She had crushed the masala herself earlier that evening, the steady thud of the pestle against stone strangely soothing, her thoughts unspooling in rhythm with the motion.

Cooking for Kabir had become a ritual she didn't question anymore.

Not because he expected it—he never did—but because it anchored her. Because watching him settle into her space, watching her space expand to accommodate him, felt like an act of deep, quiet love. Every meal they shared here felt like adding another stitch to something forming slowly between them—durable, unshowy, meant to last.

She shook the pan lightly, letting the curry simmer, then turned down the flame. The kitchen light cast warm, honeyed shadows on the tiled wall, catching the faint crack along the edge of one tile that she had meant to fix for three years now and never had. Beside the stove, a small framed postcard leaned against the wall—an old sketch of a seaside fort. She had bought it in Goa on a trip years ago, when life felt reckless and uncharted. Sometimes,

when the kitchen was quiet and the world outside seemed too loud, she looked at that postcard and thought about the woman she had been back then.

Tonight, the memory surfaced but didn't sting.

Kabir sat in the worn armchair near the window, one leg crossed over the other, his shoulders finally relaxed in a way they rarely were when he was on base. He looked ridiculously good as held a low tumbler of whiskey loosely in his hand, the amber liquid catching the lamplight and throwing fractured highlights across the rim of the glass. His jacket lay folded over the back of the chair, neat in the way all his things were neat, as though tidiness wasn't a habit but a discipline.

He had changed into a soft, dark shirt that clung lightly to his frame, its collar open just enough to reveal the strong line of his throat. His hair was still damp from the shower he had taken when he arrived, and a faint trace of his aftershave drifted across the room every time he shifted. He watched her cook, amused by her absolute refusal to let him help her. She cooked because she wanted to feed him, which somehow felt more intimate than any romantic gesture he had ever seen exaggerated in films.

Aditi moved barefoot across the kitchen, the tiled floor cool beneath her soles, perfectly aware of him without looking at him.

She always was.

It wasn't vigilance, exactly. More an attunement. His presence seemed to gently recalibrate the apartment—shifting the air, the light, even the pace of her own movements. When he was here, the space didn't feel crowded. It felt—balanced.

Kabir watched her. He watched the lamplight catch on the side of her face. The soft curve of her mouth as she focused on the pot. The small frown when she tasted the curry and adjusted the salt. He wondered if she knew that he had run tonight's conversation through his mind so many times that it had almost begun to sound like a briefing.

The city hummed beyond the window—traffic layered beneath the occasional impatient honk, a motorbike accelerating somewhere far off, someone laughing on a balcony as the night deepened. A dog barked twice and then fell silent. A ceiling fan from the apartment upstairs gave off a faint, rhythmic whine.

Inside the flat, time felt slowed. Contained. Insulated from the quick, relentless momentum outside.

She placed two plates on the small, square dining table, the wood nicked and scratched from years of use. This table had seen so many stages of her life—solitary dinners eaten between deadlines, hurried breakfasts, tearful cups of tea during heartbreak, tentative brunches with friends who tried not to pry. It bore, in its own quiet way, the map of her adulthood.

Tonight, it felt different. Tonight, it was full.

Kabir told her an anecdote about one of the younger officers at Western Air Command who had mixed up briefing documents and nearly walked into a meeting with flight statistics instead of maintenance logs. He stripped the story of anything classified, but the shape of the situation remained. Aditi could picture it—the long table, the crisp files, the tension underneath everything that never quite dissipated.

Aditi countered with a story about her neighbour downstairs, who had once again tried to feed a stray dog an entire packet of biscuits and had then looked genuinely puzzled when the dog had promptly vomited them onto the landing.

“Karma,” Kabir said mildly, biting back a smile. He felt the small box in his pocket press against his thigh, not insistently—just there.

“And my mother,” Aditi added dryly, “called to inform me that my cooking will remain mediocre until I learn to ‘listen to the spices’.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And... do spices speak?”

“She believes they do. I think they’re just trying to survive.”

He laughed at that—low, unforced, warm. The sound slid through her chest like sunlight through curtains. She joined in, but beneath her amusement she noticed something else.

He was quieter than usual. Not distant—just contained. The way air feels before rain.

It was a distinction she had learned to recognise over time. Kabir never withdrew emotionally, not in the way some men did, building invisible walls that had to be scaled with effort and patience. When something weighed on him, he didn’t retreat. He gathered himself inward, the way he did before a critical landing or a manoeuvre that required absolute precision. He grew

deliberate. Focused. As though holding something carefully and testing its balance.

Tonight, that readiness hummed around him, almost imperceptible but unmistakable.

He took a sip of whiskey. Watched the faint ring it left behind on the wood. The glass clinked softly as he set it down. He leaned back in his chair, stretching slightly, and for a brief second she watched the movement—economical, controlled, as though even in rest his body remembered its training.

“The curry was amazing,” he said finally, wiping his mouth with the corner of a napkin. “Perfect amount of heat.” He realised he was buying himself a breath when he said that, even as he meant what he said about the curry.

“Good,” Aditi replied, unable to suppress the little surge of pleasure that always accompanied his praise. “I tried that new spice blend my mother sent. The one she insisted I’ve apparently been using wrong my entire life.”

He smiled faintly. “Of course she did.”

They shared the joke, but the moment afterward shifted—the air thickening, like the pause between inhalation and exhalation.

The silence that followed wasn’t their usual companionable quiet. This one pressed, gently but insistently, against Aditi’s chest. It wanted acknowledgment. It wanted space. It wanted a decision.

She placed her fork down slowly and looked up. Their eyes met.

Kabir’s gaze was steady, as always, anchored by some inner calm she had come to rely on. But there was tension at the corners of his eyes—a faint tightening that had nothing to do with fatigue. She had seen that look once before, on the day he had told her he might be deployed earlier than expected. It was the gaze of a man who had already crossed the internal threshold of decision and was now preparing to articulate it aloud.

Her breath hitched, almost imperceptibly. Beneath the table, he curled his fingers once inside his palm beneath the table — a small grounding gesture — then he sat up straighter.

Kabir reached across the table for her hand. The gesture was simple. There was no flourish, no drama. His palm was warm, calloused in places from endless

training hours, his fingers strong and unhesitating as they curled around her own. The contact grounded her instantly, even as her pulse fluttered faster.

He turned her hand over gently, tracing his thumb across the soft skin near her wrist without looking, as though he had memorized the geography of it. Her gaze shifted—drawn, as it often was, to his forearm. The dark, simple band of his field watch stood out against his skin. The glass bore faint scuffs, the strap worn supple with time. It was the kind of object that didn't need to be replaced; it needed to be relied on.

Below it, the musculature of his arm stood out in defined, rope-like lines—strength born not of vanity, but of repetition. Of drills. Of responsibility. It was the arm of a man who trusted his body because he had trained it into trustworthiness. A man who depended on his body in moments when hesitation could cost lives.

Aditi loved that detail more than she ever said aloud—this quiet marriage of utility and restraint. Kabir didn't perform masculinity. He embodied capability without spectacle.

Kabir felt her attention linger and almost smiled. She saw things most people didn't notice — the small, practical details that made up his life. He wondered, briefly, if she realized how deeply he valued being seen like that.

"Aditi," he said.

Just her name.

He didn't soften his tone, but he didn't harden it either. He spoke it the way he always did when the stakes were real—clear, certain, without padding. The sound threaded through her chest and tightened something deep there, sharp and intimate.

She stilled.

"I don't know how to do grand gestures," he continued, his mouth curving into a small, self-aware smile. It was the expression he wore when acknowledging something fundamental about himself without apology. "And you know my life isn't predictable."

She nodded, her thumb brushing the inside of his wrist. Beneath skin and tendons, his pulse beat steady against her touch.

"There are risks," he said. "Long absences. Days when you won't hear from me. Nights when I'll be halfway across the country—or further."

He paused deliberately. Kabir had a rare respect for silence. He let it settle. He allowed it to function not as emptiness, but as space—an invitation for truth to surface.

She listened.

"But what I do know is this," he said finally. His voice dropped slightly, not in volume, but in weight. "I want to come back to you. Every time. I want you to be the person I tell about my worst days and my best landings. I want—"

He hesitated, not from uncertainty, but from carefulness. "I want a life where, no matter where the Air Force sends me, you're home."

The word landed with quiet gravity, radiating outward like ripples across still water.

Home.

It wasn't romantic in the way stories sometimes pretended romance was. It wasn't a promise of endless bliss or fairytale resolution. It was something sturdier. Something that asked as much as it offered.

He slipped his hand into his pocket with measured intent. When it emerged, it held a small box.

Not ornate. Not theatrical. The kind of box that didn't demand attention but commanded it once opened.

He placed it gently on the table between them and lifted the lid. Inside, the ring lay in its cradle—understated, elegant, designed for longevity rather than spectacle. A single stone, clear and unwavering, set into a band that looked capable of surviving decades without losing itself.

He had chosen the ring the way he chose equipment — simple, functional, built to last. He didn't need flash. He needed something honest.

"I can't promise safety," he said softly. For the first time, something in his voice betrayed vulnerability. Not fear—honesty. "But I can promise honesty. Loyalty. And that choosing you will never feel like a compromise."

His fingers tightened around hers, just briefly. "Will that be okay with you?"

The world contracted.

The lamplit room blurred at the edges, its familiar shapes softening. Outside, the distant traffic might as well have belonged to another city. Another life. Aditi felt as though she were standing at the threshold of something vast and still, poised on the lip of deep water, knowing that once she stepped forward the current would claim her in ways she could not fully predict.

She hesitated. It wasn't doubt. Not exactly. It was memory — rising like an echo. Another life. Another version of herself who once chased brightness like a dare.

A rooftop. Monsoon wind. Angad laughing with his arms flung wide, rain slicking his hair flat against his forehead. "Come on," he had shouted over the thunder, pulling her toward the edge as if gravity were an inconvenience and not a law. "This—this is living, Aditi. Tell me you don't feel it."

She had felt it. Heart racing, throat raw, body alight with the reckless thrill of standing too close to the margin of things. For one dizzying second she believed that safety was for people who didn't know how to love.

The memory flickered — bright, intoxicating, and gone. She felt the ache of it. The beauty. The danger. The hollowness that had followed when the storms kept coming and there was never anywhere safe to land.

Emotion rose slowly in her chest, spreading warmth that bordered on relief. Gratitude. A sense of shelter she had never allowed herself to fully crave before.

With Kabir, love had never been volatile. It had not come crashing into her life like a storm announcing itself. It had arrived quietly, like morning light easing into a room—gentle, unapologetic, inevitable. There had been no riddles, no half-truths, no games that left her second-guessing. With him, she always knew where she stood.

He was steadiness shaped into a person. He was right.

And yet—

Somewhere deep within, an old, thin thread tightened. A delicate, almost nostalgic sadness tugged lightly, as though reminding her of a version of herself that had believed other truths once upon a time.

She missed, suddenly, the reckless brightness of her early twenties. She missed the chaos that had masqueraded as passion. The love that had burned fast and

hot, teaching her the seductive lie that intensity and destiny were the same thing.

She missed Angad.

Not the man who existed now—they had both grown past the people they had once been. She missed the dream they had inhabited together. The dizzy exhilaration. The wild, breathless sense that anything could happen, that certainty itself was the enemy.

That love had felt like flight without checking fuel, engines, or weather. Thrilling. Dangerous. Unsustainable. It had also left ruins behind.

Kabir's love was different. It was structure. Foundation. The solid stretch of ground before take-off—the assurance that return was not only possible, but planned for.

For one bittersweet heartbeat, Aditi longed for the girl she had been with Angad—the one who believed that surrendering control meant surrendering herself. The one who mistook unpredictability for significance. Who equated comfort with stagnation, and commitment with confinement.

She wasn't that girl anymore. But grief for one's former selves, she had learned, didn't vanish simply because those selves had been wrong.

Kabir waited. He trusted the waiting. He didn't lean forward. He didn't fill the silence. He didn't try to influence her with reassurance or urgency. He simply stayed.

Open. Ready for whatever truth emerged. He watched the way her eyes softened when she saw the ring, the way uncertainty flickered for just an instant behind them. He braced — not against rejection, but against the possibility that she might choose a different life than the one tethered to his.

He would understand if she did. He would carry the understanding quietly.

When he said: *I can't promise safety*, it cost him something. Not pride — he wasn't proud about danger. But detachment. Saying it out loud meant acknowledging again that there were parts of his future he didn't control. He watched her carefully.

She looked at the ring again. This—she thought—is the man I would build a life with. This is the man who will show up.

The melancholy thread didn't snap. It loosened—easing back, softer now, like a tide receding without drama. The ache inside her didn't disappear entirely, but it changed texture, becoming something gentler. Not resistance. Remembrance.

She drew in a long, slow breath. The warmth of his hand. The quiet, unwavering steadiness in his gaze. The ring between them. The life that had already begun, not in declarations, but in everyday acts—shared groceries, long conversations, unspoken support, small compromises that felt less like losses and more like choices.

“Yes,” she said.

The word felt clear as glass.

“Yes, Kabir.”

Relief crossed his features so swiftly she might have missed it if she had blinked—a subtle release of tension he hadn't allowed himself to acknowledge until now. He hadn't realized until that moment how taut his chest had been. Then his expression opened fully, his smile breaking free, bright but unforced. It changed his entire face, softening its usual discipline.

He reached for the ring with steady fingers. He slid it onto her finger, moving slowly, as though honouring the act for what it was—the quiet marking of a future neither of them could entirely predict, but both were willing to build. His hand didn't tremble when he slid the ring on — but his breath did change. He noticed it. A fraction deeper. A fraction steadier. The ring was cool for a moment. Then her skin warmed it. It settled there as though it had simply been waiting for its place.

He leaned forward and kissed her. It wasn't a dramatic kiss. Not cinematic. Not triumphant. There was no sweeping urgency, no clutching desperation. It was deliberate, grounding, a kiss that sealed a promise rather than claimed a victory. His lips rested against hers with tender assurance, and she felt herself exhale fully for the first time all evening.

He felt her weight relax into him — and something inside his chest shifted, humbled by the trust of it. The weight of her trust leaned fully into him, and he understood — in a way he hadn't even fully admitted to himself — how deeply he had wanted this. He also understood the cost. He imagined airport goodbyes. Missed calls. Missions he wouldn't be able to fully explain. The

burden of his absence landing not on him, but on her. He wondered — not for the first time — whether love meant asking someone else to learn your fears by living with them. He tightened his arm gently around her and said softly, “I love you, Aditi.”

She didn't say it back. She didn't need to. Instead she held his hand tighter. They stayed that way for a long moment. Later, they moved without hurry. The plates remained on the table. The curry cooled. The lamp threw a soft pool of light across their joined hands—the simple black strap of his watch brushing against the new, gleaming ring on her finger.

An accidental symmetry.

Eventually, Aditi rose and circled the table, drawn by instinct rather than decision. She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. His arm lifted automatically, wrapping around her, settling into the curve of her back with a familiarity that felt both comforting and profound. There was an unspoken promise: *I will meet the risk with truth. Every time.*

She breathed him in—the faint clean scent of his aftershave mingling with lingering garlic and roasted cashews. Outside, the night deepened. Someone turned off their balcony light. Somewhere distant, a siren wailed briefly and faded.

She told herself this was what safety felt like. This was what right felt like. And perhaps—she knew—it truly was.

But as she glanced around the room—the bookshelf with novels from years past, the slightly faded curtains, the framed postcard of the fort—a quiet awareness threaded through her.

Choosing permanence was its own kind of risk. It demanded courage not of leaping, but of staying. Of building. Of accepting that some doors would now remain closed—not out of loss, but out of intentionality. And yet, acknowledging the closing of doors still carried a faint echo of mourning.

For one suspended second, she allowed herself to honour that. The girl she had once been. The dreams she had once chased. The idea that love had to be chaos to be real. She let them pass through her gently, like ghosts touching the threshold before leaving.

She didn't flinch. She didn't hesitate.

The shadow of that other life lingered at the edge of her awareness—not an invitation anymore, but a memory. Something to look back at with a kind of fondness, not longing. She tightened her fingers around Kabir's.

Kabir closed his eyes briefly, listening to their breathing fall into the same rhythm. He had flown through storms that rattled metal and instruments. He had trusted physics, training, instinct. Tonight, commitment required the same steadiness — but different courage.

He held her hand, the black band of his watch brushing against the silver ring. Two circles. Two kinds of time. She turned her face into his shoulder. He rested his cheek lightly against her hair. Kabir exhaled. He had flown through storms. He had trusted instruments in zero visibility. He had landed in crosswinds that clawed at the aircraft like hands. But nothing, he realised, demanded steady hands quite like staying. And tonight, he chose staying — the way he chose everything that mattered: deliberately.

And together — without ceremony, without fanfare — they chose the life that waited quietly in front of them.

Chapter 11

Kabir chose a Sunday evening.

Not because it was symbolic, not because movies made Sunday evenings feel like crossroads — but because he knew his parents. Sundays were their smallest days. Errands wound down, newspapers folded neatly into rectangles, the evening tea brewed with almost ceremonial attention. The house would be calm, respectful, unhurried.

He didn't drive over. He called.

It wasn't avoidance. It was simply the logic of a life that had unfolded across postings, transfers, long stretches of distance punctuated by brief returns. Conversation on the phone had become one of their shared languages.

His mother picked up first. "Kabir," she said — the word warm, familiar, threaded with the quiet worry she kept reserved exclusively for him. "Have you eaten?"

Kabir smiled in spite of himself. "Yes, Ma. Hi. Can you put Dad on the line too?"

There was a rustle — the particular choreography of footsteps, a chair moving, a half-suppressed curiosity in her voice when she replied:

"Both of us? Should we sit down?"

"If you want," he said mildly.

They came on the line together, and the silence that followed wasn't awkward. It was the comfortable kind of silence that only very old relationships manage — an ease made of decades.

His father spoke first. “Everything alright at WAC?”

“Everything’s fine,” Kabir said. “This isn’t... that kind of call.”

A subtle shift – their alertness remained, but softened.

“Then tell us,” his mother said gently.

He didn’t build into it, didn’t preface or explain. That wasn’t his way. For a man who once flew missions requiring precision timing and clear decisions, ambiguity had never been his preferred tool.

“I’ve been seeing someone,” he said. “Her name is Aditi.”

There was no gasp. No dramatic exclamation. His parents had always loved with dignity.

His father cleared his throat. “How long?”

“A while,” Kabir replied. “Long enough that she matters.” His mother’s tone warmed, wrapped itself carefully around the space between curiosity and concern. “And what kind of person is she?”

He paused – not to hide anything, but to choose the right truth.

“She’s steady,” he said slowly. “Kind. Smart without needing to prove it every five minutes. She knows responsibility isn’t a performance. And somehow... she makes my life quieter, in the right ways.”

His mother exhaled softly. “That sounds like someone who knows herself.”

“She does,” he said. “And she doesn’t care about medals or bases or stories. She respects me – not the uniform. That feels... important.”

His father hummed – the same contemplative sound Kabir had heard since childhood, when examinations, scraped knees, and big choices all seemed to require that exact thoughtful pause. “And are you serious?”

Kabir didn’t hesitate. “Yes. I asked her to marry me and she said yes.”

Not dramatic. Not chest-thumping certainty. Just a steady truth laid bare.

His mother laughed softly – relief disguised as amusement. “We were beginning to think you’d decided aircraft were enough for you.”

“I still need aircraft,” he replied dryly. “But it turns out, I also enjoy coming home to someone who isn’t a checklist.”

The three of them smiled – he could hear it.

His father returned gently to practical ground. “Does she understand your work now? Not the flying – the kind you do here. The meetings, the unpredictability, the demands that look invisible from outside?”

“Yes,” Kabir said. “She knows the realities. Not the mythology. The real life version.”

A softer silence. Not caution – trust returning to familiar posture.

“We trust your judgment,” his father said finally. “We always have. Bring her home when it feels right.”

His mother added quietly: “And take your time. We don’t need a date or a label tonight. We just needed to hear your voice sound like this.”

“Like what?” he asked, genuinely surprised.

“Content,” she said. “Not performing strength. Just content.”

He swallowed.

After they hung up, he sat for a moment with the stillness – phone screen dark, room dim, the evening outside slow and quiet. There was no adrenaline rush. No cliff-edge feeling. Just calm.

As though a truth that had already been alive simply stepped into the light.

He typed: Told my parents. They’d like to meet you – whenever you’re ready. No rush.

A moment passed – not hesitation, just serenity moving at its own pace.

Then her reply: Okay. Whenever it feels natural. And thank you – for saying it out loud.

He leaned back. For years, talk about the future had felt like intrusion – like someone knocking on a door he hadn’t had time to build yet.

Now it simply felt like air.

They chose a weekend without ceremony. No formal introductions, no stiff living-room staging. Just lunch at his parents’ house – a place Kabir often described as stubbornly sunlit, with houseplants that refused to die no matter what.

Aditi arrived with a modest box of sweets and a potted basil plant. “Practical gift,” she murmured to Kabir outside the gate, nervousness tucked beneath a wry smile. “If they don’t like me, at least the plant will survive.”

“They’ll like you,” he said – not as reassurance, but as fact.

His mother opened the door and paused. Not assessing. Not measuring. Just seeing. Then the smile arrived – gentle, real – and with it, warmth. “Come,” she said. “You must be tired. Sit down. Eat something first.”

His father stepped in from the adjoining room, spectacles sliding down his nose – a man who believed politeness was not optional but ethical. He greeted Aditi with simple respect, the kind that asks for nothing in return.

Conversation began the way good conversations do – sideways. Traffic. Weather. Houseplants. Kabir’s mother proudly declared war on insects eating her marigolds. Aditi laughed, joined in, listened.

Only gradually did the room loosen – jokes, shared glances, tiny beginnings of ease. When Aditi complimented the mango pickle, his mother brightened instantly. “That recipe is older than Kabir,” she said. “Unlike Kabir, it improves with time.”

Kabir groaned. Aditi laughed. Something in the room softened further – not breakthrough, just warmth. Lunch lingered. Stories rose and settled like birds. And only when plates were mostly empty did his father gently change direction.

“You work in publishing,” he said thoughtfully. “Books take patience. And so much goes unseen before a sentence ever reaches the world.”

Aditi smiled, surprised by the accuracy. “They do,” she said. “Most of my work is invisible. I help things become clearer – not louder. I like it that way.”

His mother listened carefully. “And do stories ever follow you home?”

“Sometimes,” Aditi admitted. “Especially the fragile ones. But I’ve learned not every unfinished draft needs to live inside me forever. I read, I help – I let go.”

His mother’s gaze softened. “And does Kabir make letting go easier?”

Aditi didn’t look at him. She answered the woman in front of her. “Yes. He doesn’t try to fix what isn’t his to fix. He just sits with it – which is harder than fixing.”

Kabir saw something shift in his parents — a quiet recognition. An understanding.

His father turned to Aditi with the same gentle seriousness he'd once used when teaching Kabir to ride a bicycle.

"And how do you feel about the demands of his work now? The unpredictability? The fact that often, the stressful parts won't look dramatic to anyone else?"

Aditi answered without dramatizing. "I don't think love should live in constant worry," she said. "I think it should know how to wait — and how to welcome. I'm still learning. But I'm willing."

The room didn't tense. It contemplated. His mother rose with practiced ease, pouring fresh chai as if lightening gravity were a domestic skill.

"We don't expect perfection," she said. "Only kindness — toward him, toward you, and toward yourselves."

"That seems fair," Aditi replied quietly.

Later, in the living room, Kabir's mother handed over an album — photographs of a boy with oversized seriousness, obsessively copying airplanes into notebooks.

"He's been practicing this expression since twelve," Aditi teased.

"Born looking like he had a briefing in ten minutes," his father chuckled.

Kabir muttered something inaudible — and smiled the entire time.

When it was time to leave, there were no whispered conferences, no judgments disguised as politeness. Just accompaniment to the door.

A small box pressed gently into Aditi's hands. "Pickle," his mother said, softer now. "For difficult days."

And then: "Come again. Not formally. Just... come."

Outside, Kabir realized he'd been holding his breath. Aditi squeezed his hand. "They're good," she said.

"So are you," he replied.

They didn't dissect the visit. Some moments don't need autopsy. They simply drove, windows half-open, the evening folding itself quietly around them. It didn't feel like a milestone. It felt like continuity.

At home, Aditi found the atmosphere more charged.

Aditi's aunt had been careful, in the days before the meeting, not to pretend she wasn't curious.

They were having tea when she finally spoke — not looking up, stirring lazily.

"So," she said, as though discussing the weather, "this young man who used to fly and now chooses not to — that is usually the sign of someone who understands that excitement and meaning are not the same thing."

Aditi blinked. "I didn't say he *chose*—"

"No," her aunt said pleasantly, "but you didn't say he resents it either. That's better. Resentment is terribly noisy in a house. It walks in ahead of the person who owns it."

And then she changed the subject entirely — to mango prices.

Aditi sat for a moment, absorbing the after-echo — the way her aunt's words quietly rearranged the picture without ever sounding like advice.

They chose the café with its big windows and slow fans. Chai steam curled up between conversations that didn't quite know where to begin.

Aditi's aunt watched everyone with soft interest, as though hosting a play she herself had not written.

When introductions finished, she smiled brightly: "Sit, sit — if everyone stands, people begin to think we are about to negotiate treaties."

It sounded flippant. It wasn't. Everyone relaxed.

Menus opened, ignored. The table slid first into familiar conversational safety nets: cities lived in, neighborhoods lost to development, the unstoppable rise of café prices.

Kabir stayed mostly quiet, letting currents form naturally. Aditi caught his eye once — he nodded gently, a silent yes-you're-doing-fine.

His father began the deeper shift. "Aditi," he said to Aditi's father, "has a remarkable steadiness."

Aditi's father chuckled. "She didn't learn it from us. She just decided anxiety wasn't a hobby."

Kabir's mother smiled. "And Kabir," she added lightly, "pretends his softness is classified."

"Excuse me," Kabir said mildly. "I am right here."

"We know," she replied.

The table relaxed further.

Questions unfolded — curious, not prying. Stories followed. Small confessions surfaced: worries, hopes, the ordinary mathematics of how families rearrange themselves around love.

Someone brought up flying — carefully. Aditi's uncle turned to Kabir. "You flew Sukhois, didn't you?"

Kabir nodded. "Yes. A long time ago, it feels like. Different chapter."

"Do you miss it?" her mother asked quietly.

He thought about it — the weightless moments, the responsibility, the long debrief rooms, the quiet afterward that felt like eternity.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "But I don't miss living on the edge of every day. I like what I do now. It shapes things instead of burning through them."

His father's eyes softened. Pride didn't need to be loud.

Aditi's aunt tilted her head. "It is a good sign," she said softly, "when someone knows how to step down from a height without feeling smaller."

No one responded immediately — not because it was awkward, but because the sentence landed where it needed to.

Later, the conversation drifted toward their work — Aditi explaining publishing deadlines that made no noise, Kabir explaining WAC operations that changed outcomes without ever being seen. The connection surprised all six elders — how invisible work could build visible worlds.

The funniest moment arrived unexpectedly.

Kabir's father squinted at the menu. "What is avocado toast," he asked gravely, "and why does it cost like jewelry?"

Aditi's aunt replied instantly: "It's fashionable suffering."

The entire table dissolved into laughter — the kind that rests on shared rhythm rather than politeness. Even the waiter smiled.

When the conversation turned toward relationships — cautiously, respectfully — no one asked Kabir and Aditi if they were sure.

Her aunt simply observed: "Some people fall in love with weather. They like storms, lightning, drama. And some people fall in love with climate."

She smiled at Kabir's parents. "Climate takes patience. But you can live your whole life in it."

Aditi felt, unexpectedly, steadier.

Half an hour later, when everyone seemed content, when laughter was easy, and plates were scattered with crumbs, her aunt spoke one last time — airily, almost absent-minded: "It's very nice when two families don't immediately begin arranging the future. It leaves space for the future to walk in on its own feet." She said it like a compliment to the chai.

But everyone at the table felt gently acknowledged — and gently guided — without pressure.

Near the end, Kabir's mother set her cup down.

"We aren't in a hurry," she said softly. "They're adults. They will move at a pace their lives can hold."

Aditi's father nodded, grateful. "And I am glad," he added, "that the people who raised him think like this."

Heads nodded. Aditi's uncle smiled, relieved. Her aunt gave one of her soft, approving looks — the kind that made every sentence she endorsed feel suddenly more rational. There was a shared sigh — collective, content.

And Kabir — who had been quiet, watching, weighing — cleared his throat lightly. "Actually," he said.

Six pairs of parental eyes turned.

He didn't rush, didn't dramatize. His voice stayed calm in that maddening way he had — like he was filing a report that had already been decided. "We've been

talking. And... if things continue to go right here, we were thinking about a January wedding.”

The word didn't explode. It rippled. The calm table rearranged itself into something brighter, noisier, more alive — like a lake suddenly full of boats.

Aditi blinked — not shocked, not ambushed — but still stunned by how spoken aloud made something sound completely different.

There was a beat. Then everything happened at once.

“Oh!” his mother said, joy flooding through discipline. “January is— January is excellent. Before the real heat.”

His father immediately shifted into logistics. “We'll have to check venues quickly. January fills fast.”

Aditi's uncle leaned forward. “Tent, definitely. Evening function. Otherwise everyone will freeze.”

Her father nodded, half-dazed, already thinking in measurements. “Tents need proper flooring. And heaters. Big ones. Someone should ask Sharma's boy; his cousin works with decorators.”

Aditi's mother — who had until then been measured and gracious — suddenly found her voice softening with a different eagerness. “I'll have to polish the jewellery,” she murmured, already mentally opening boxes. “And the necklaces... I should have them restrung. It's been years.”

Aditi's aunt clapped her hands lightly, delighted. “January weddings are excellent for embroidery,” she said, floating into the conversation like a gentle breeze. “Nothing too heavy — just the kind that looks delicate but secretly survives three hours of hugging.” She smiled serenely, as though describing monsoon clouds. “And we mustn't forget the dupattas,” she continued, dreamily. “They are always the trouble. They slide at important moments — like opinions.”

Kabir's mother laughed, dizzy with sudden excitement.

His father, with a completely different energy, leaned across to Aditi's father. “And the expenses — we'll divide sensibly. None of this old-fashioned nonsense where one side collapses under everything.”

“No, no,” Aditi’s uncle said immediately, almost grateful. “We’ll do this together. We believe in fairness.”

“Good,” Kabir’s father nodded. “Then there won’t be unpleasantness later.”

His mother, meanwhile, exhaled deeply. “Thank God they didn’t make us wait years,” she said – half-joking, half not. “My heart is not constructed for open-ended suspense.”

They were all talking now – overlapping, enthusiastic, each thought cascading over the next. Dates. Priests. Guest lists. Décor. Lehngas. Weather. Menus. Photographers who “don’t make everyone look like porcelain.”

It was affectionate chaos – the kind that smells faintly of dreams and cardamom. And in the middle of it, Aditi felt something that wasn’t fear – just a wave. So many voices. So much expectation. All loving. All loud.

Her aunt noticed – of course she did – and spoke suddenly in that mild, drift-y tone. “Oh, weddings are such wonderful illusions,” she sighed. “Everyone thinks we are planning one day, but really we are planning how everyone wishes to be remembered for the next ten years.”

No one quite knew how to answer that. Which was perfect – it slowed the table just enough.

Under the table, Kabir’s fingers brushed hers – then closed around her hand, warm, steady, anchoring. He didn’t look at her. He simply held. You’re okay, the touch said. Nothing is running away with us. We’re still choosing.

She breathed – once, twice – and the swirl turned from overwhelming to simply *big*.

The parents, meanwhile, had reached a new stage: strategic coordination. Kabir’s father tapped the table thoughtfully.

“I think we should meet again,” he said.

“Yes,” Aditi’s uncle agreed immediately. “Soon. There’s much to sort. January is barely a month away”

Aditi lifted her head – automatically picturing another group lunch, more noise, more eager talk. But her aunt’s smile turned slightly conspiratorial. “Without these children,” she said pleasantly.

All the elders nodded – with the surprising enthusiasm of conspirators finding one another.

“Yes,” her mother added, relief hidden under gentleness. “Let them rest. We will handle... practicalities.”

Practicalities, Aditi thought faintly. Such a dangerous, powerful word.

Goodbyes took longer than arrivals. There were hugs now – warmer, firmer. Phone numbers exchanged again, this time with notes about decorators, fabric shops, caterers who didn’t over-salt.

Just before leaving, Aditi’s aunt bent and kissed her cheek – soft, almost absent-minded. “It’s alright to feel slightly breathless,” she murmured. “It only means everyone is imagining happiness at once. It tends to crowd the room.” And then she drifted away, as though she had merely commented on the sugar content in the chai.

Outside the café, as the families separated, promises floated between them: “We’ll talk tomorrow.” “I’ll check that hall.” “Send me the jeweller’s number.” “Yes – and we’ll meet. Soon. Properly.”

Kabir and Aditi walked to the car in silence.

He waited until the doors closed, the outside noise dimmed. Then he turned, eyes gentler now. “Too much?”

She let out a breath – half-laugh, half-confession. “Just... sudden.”

He nodded. “January was always in our heads,” he said softly. “Today it just... got shared.”

She thought about it – about tents and embroidery and jewellery and flooring – all the noisy, loving scaffolding that had risen instantly around a private decision. Then she smiled. “Okay,” she said quietly. “January, then.”

He squeezed her hand again.

And somewhere, behind them, four very determined adults were already planning scaffolding that would – in their minds – hold up the sky.

Chapter 12

The haldi happened in the courtyard of her old house – the place that still smelled faintly of wet earth after the morning washdown, of turmeric warming in bowls, of flowers waiting for instructions.

Sun poured everywhere. It didn't sit politely on surfaces. It glowed across faces, slid down walls, turned loose threads gold.

People laughed more easily under that sun – noisy laughter, unfiltered laughter – the kind that spills and needs no excuse.

And Kabir – who had spent most of his adult life wearing composure the way pilots wear oxygen masks – was laughing hardest of all. He sat on the low wooden stool like he'd been born to do this: kurta already yellowing from enthusiastic hands, hair sticking up slightly where someone had mussed it. His smile wasn't careful. It wasn't the restrained Air Force smile trained for public ceremonies.

It was ridiculous. Radiant. Utterly himself.

Someone smeared haldi across his cheek with theatrical reverence. Another person shouted, "More! This is not decoration – this is protection!"

And before anyone could protest, laughter erupted again as his pilot friends descended as a coordinated assault team – except this time, their mission objective was turmeric. They weren't polished here. They were loud. Voices full of affectionate bullying: "Sir, permission to ruin your clothes!" "Target acquired!" "Look at him – smiling like he just got cleared for takeoff."

They were careful – they never forgot rank, even now – but affection softened everything. They called him “sir” with warmth, not distance, and Kabir accepted it with mock irritation and real delight.

One of them, wiping haldi from his own face with exaggerated tragedy, declared: “I trained to handle high-G maneuvers. No one prepared me for aunties with bowls.”

The courtyard dissolved into laughter.

Kabir’s parents watched from nearby – his mother pretending to scold, his father pretending to supervise – both failing, both glowing with something that looked dangerously like pride wrapped in relief.

And through all of it, Kabir kept smiling like the sky had finally come indoors and sat beside him. He wasn’t thinking about what came next. He wasn’t planning forward. He was simply happy. Unprotected, uncomplicated happiness.

Aditi watched from the edge – dupatta pulled slightly tighter than necessary, face open, eyes thoughtful. She knew – with a clarity that surprised even her – that she was choosing right. Not “safe.” Not “acceptable.” Right.

Kabir was gentle without being soft. Strong without needing to demonstrate it. Funny, but never at anyone’s expense. She looked at him and felt something deeply steady rise inside her – a quiet consent.

And yet–

Thoughts are contrary creatures. Even in happiness, they wander backward. Uninvited, Angad appeared in her mind – like a figure seen across a railway platform through the blur of a passing train. She didn’t summon him. He simply arrived.

Not the Angad who had hurt her by leaving. The earlier version – the version who stood laughing on terraces, who believed love should feel like windstorms, who would, on a day like this, probably have been theatrical and adoring and entirely incapable of letting her be still.

She wondered, just briefly: What would today have looked like if that story hadn’t broken? Then the thought dissolved – not violently, not guiltily – just faded like steam. Because the day hadn’t broken. It had changed direction.

Her aunt drifted beside her — half watching the chaos, half lost in her own strange mind. Without looking at Aditi, she murmured: “It’s impossible to avoid ghosts at weddings. They attend uninvited, clap politely, and leave when they realize they don’t belong anymore.”

Aditi glanced at her — startled, then oddly relieved.

Her aunt smiled faintly. “Let them come,” she added. “Just don’t give them chairs.”

And then she wandered off to advise someone about where to place marigold strings that looked emotionally confused.

Aditi breathed.

Kabir caught her eye from across the courtyard — face smeared in yellow, grin still wide — and lifted both eyebrows as if to say: *I am happy*.

She laughed — openly now. And something loosened.

The haldi bowls were refilled. Hands reached, voices rose, turmeric became blessing and mischief intertwined.

By the end of it, Kabir looked like a festival had personally chosen him as a canvas. His friends saluted him dramatically. Someone shouted again, “Standout Flanker pilot, defeated by aunties!” and another voice added, “Luckily he’s at WAC now — safer missions!”

Kabir wiped turmeric from his eyes, still laughing. It didn’t feel like teasing. It felt like admiration disguised as nonsense. And when they helped him up — all those pilots, those friends — they handled him gently. Because joy, they knew, was serious cargo.

Evening light fell soft and slow across the lawns, the sky turned a patient, watchful blue, and the air smelled faintly of jasmine and dust — that faint, stubborn smell of summer evenings that refused to behave like postcards.

From afar, the mandap glowed — not ostentatiously — just calmly, the way a place looks when it is meant to hold something solemn and tender. Strings of marigolds framed it like sunlit thoughts. Lamps flickered at the edges. The priest’s assistant tested the microphone three times, even though the priest had promised he didn’t need it.

The decorators, tired and triumphant, stepped back to admire their work. Someone dropped a tray, gasped, and was reassured. Children practiced running routes around the chairs until someone scolded them gently and they sulked – briefly.

And in that soft bustle, inside a quiet room just beyond the corridor, Aditi's parents stood together for a long moment beside their daughter.

They weren't technically *doing* anything. They were simply absorbing.

Her father adjusted the cuff of his kurta for the third time – not because it needed fixing, but because his hands needed purpose. His hair had been carefully combed back, then mussed by nervous fingers. He had the look of a man who hadn't fully learned how to carry joy – like it might slip if he didn't hold still.

Her mother stood quieter, more composed. She kept pressing the edge of her saree pallu to make sure it fell right – not out of vanity, but because rituals made her keenly aware that photographs lived longer than memories. Yet behind her tidiness was an extraordinary tenderness – the kind that noticed the smallest things and remembered them forever.

Neither of them said very much. They didn't need to.

Their daughter stood before the mirror. And the mirror, for once, seemed grateful.

Aditi's lehenga wasn't screaming for attention. It shimmered the way breath does on winter glass – subtly, unexpectedly. The embroidery caught the light like water does – never predictable, always gentle. Her dupatta draped across her shoulder and hair with deliberate elegance, pinned where it needed to be and free where it wanted.

She looked stunning – but not *constructed*. More like the best version of herself had simply decided to arrive early.

Her mother's throat tightened. Her father blinked more than usual. Aditi smiled at them both – calm, affectionate, anchored.

Inside, her feelings were layered – happiness foremost, yes – but happiness braided with something more private, quieter. A room inside her mind had not yet packed away every picture, every echo. Angad lived there. Not as a wound. Not as a rival to the man waiting at the mandap.

Just as a once-believed future.

Aditi did not resent the thought. She did not indulge it either. She simply noticed it — the way one notices a scar one no longer traces.

“Everything alright?” her father finally managed.

Aditi laughed softly. “Yes, Papa.”

He nodded, then nodded again, satisfied but pretending he was confirming logistics instead of feeling everything at once.

Her aunt drifted in like a soft thought. No one noticed her arrival until she spoke, lightly: “Well,” she said, assessing Aditi with the gentle competence of someone who had evaluated dozens of crises and gowns. “You appear to be entirely yourself. That is an excellent sign. Brides who look like strangers to themselves make me nervous.”

Aditi laughed — the real laugh this time.

The priest’s assistant appeared at the door, bowing awkwardly. “Ten minutes,” he said. “They’re almost ready outside.” He vanished immediately, as though afraid his presence might break something fragile.

Aditi inhaled and exhaled. Her mother turned back to adjust Aditi’s necklace. “All right,” she said softly. “Let’s go.”

Kabir stood near the mandap, listening to the muffled hum of the crowd — conversations about weather, fabrics, mutual acquaintances, children, life.

He looked extraordinary — not dramatic, not ostentatious — but quietly, devastatingly elegant.

His sherwani was understated, perfectly cut. He carried himself the way he walked into briefings — calm, attentive, grateful for structure without being owned by it. His posture held history — long training, discipline honed into ease. When he smiled, it wasn’t show. It was light.

Several of his colleagues from the Air Force were there — men and women fitted into formal clothes with varying degrees of discomfort. They had that unmistakable Air Force confidence: clean lines, sharp eyes, an irreverent sense of humor held politely at bay until the rituals were done.

They admired the mandap. They admired the venue.

Mostly, they admired Kabir. "He looks like someone just gave him his favorite aircraft back," one of them murmured. Another grinned. "No, he looks happier than that."

Word moved naturally through the guests: He works at WAC now, you know. Oh yes? That's a serious posting. Of course — he used to fly Sukhois. Extraordinary pilot. Really? Yes — one of the best.

Someone near Aditi's father leaned closer — polite, impressed. "You must be very proud," someone said to him. "WAC at this stage — that's a lot of trust. Fast track to bigger commands, honestly. They don't put just anyone there. Especially not someone who hasn't proven himself in the air."

Aditi's father absorbed the words slowly. He smiled — but it wasn't a boastful smile. It was relief — the kind that comes from seeing your daughter anchor herself to someone who understands weight, not just wings.

He glanced at Kabir, watched the way the young man greeted elders — respectful without performing humility, warm without over-familiarity. "Yes," he said softly. "We're very proud."

At that moment, Kabir caught the older man's eye and smiled — just enough. Nothing flamboyant. But the gesture carried a promise: I will stand where I am needed. Aditi's father smiled back — not as approval, but as recognition.

Behind Kabir, his friends watched the families with private satisfaction. They didn't say much. They had been trained not to break atmospheres. But their presence carried something undeniable — laughter held ready, mischief wrapped in discipline, stories they would never tell aloud. They smiled like men who had seen a person's hardest versions and loved him still.

When Aditi's entrance music began—soft, unintrusive, almost like a prayer someone had whispered into a melody — conversation thinned. Chairs stilled. Heads turned. Silence arrived without command.

Her mother walked beside Aditi, fingers lightly grazing her arm, as though memorizing texture. Her father walked on the other side — not holding, not guiding — simply existing there, solid, like the trees lining a familiar street.

And Aditi walked — neither floating nor shrinking — simply moving forward with the quiet resolve of someone who knows that life isn't a single decision, but an accumulation.

There were cameras. There were sighs. But beneath it all, there was stillness.

From the mandap, Kabir's breath caught for the briefest fraction — then steadied — not because he was resisting emotion, but because he chose to experience it fully, not theatrically. He thought — quite simply: This is right. He told himself the airlessness in his insides had little to do with just how beautiful Aditi was looking

When she reached him, they didn't speak. They exchanged smiles — not rehearsed, not dramatic — just profoundly familiar.

She sat beside him. Dupattas adjusted. The priest cleared his throat politely, as though not wanting to intrude on something continuous.

Rituals are strange things. They feel like choreography — and yet, at certain moments, they become time itself.

The chanting began — low, rhythmic, old as memory. The fire was lit. Camphor flared and settled into a warm, almost comforting smoke that threaded through fabric and hair.

Aditi watched the flames and listened — not always understanding every syllable, but absorbing the intention. Rituals, she realized, were simply lived manuscripts — edited by centuries, rewritten through generations, corrected not always kindly.

Kabir tied the sacred thread with steady hands. His fingers brushed hers briefly when they passed the garlands. He didn't press, didn't linger. But the brush held assurance.

Her mother dabbed the corner of her eye with a carefully folded handkerchief. Her father did not wipe his eyes at all — which somehow made the shine in them more visible.

When the priest asked Kabir to repeat vows — ancient promises, half metaphor, half instruction — Kabir spoke clearly. Not loudly. Just clearly.

At one vow — about companionship — he looked at Aditi, and something warm moved through his expression. It wasn't romantic flourish. It was recognition.

Aditi repeated her vows softly, and for a moment, unbidden and unsummoned, Angad appeared in her thoughts — not the man himself, but the younger self she had been with him: reckless in certainty, dramatic in devotion, unaware of how time could rewrite affection into retrospect. She

didn't feel guilt. She didn't feel doubt. She simply wondered — very quietly — at how hearts manage to hold more than one past without splitting.

Then she looked at Kabir's hands around the ceremonial spoon and felt the calm return — the calm of knowing that love, at its best, does not promise fireworks. It promises presence.

Seven steps around the fire. Seven pauses. Seven witnesses.

The fire crackled, the priest's voice softened, and then the thread of rituals drew itself to an inevitable conclusion — pronouncements, blessings, a murmur through the crowd.

They were pronounced married. The word did not feel dramatic. It felt like a room had been unlocked gently.

Reception blended gradually into celebration. Music found its place. Kabir's pilot friends became the party's unofficial energy source.

Waiters glided between groups, offering trays like peace offerings. A breeze finally arrived — late, apologetic, grateful for forgiveness. Kabir's Air Force friends — those quiet, well-mannered conspirators — finally loosened just a little. They spoke to elders with grace. They carried chairs subtly where needed. One of them lifted an elderly guest's water glass with such instinctive courtesy that she immediately told three other guests what good boys pilots were.

Another told a surprisingly funny, modest story — carefully edited — about Kabir's obsession with precision, making the room laugh without making the groom the punchline.

Soon the pattern became unavoidable: Everywhere they went, warmth followed. Not loud, performative charm. Just grounded, confident kindness — the kind that wins trust without effort.

Aditi's father watched, impressed. "These are good men," someone remarked to him.

He nodded. "They carry discipline like it's furniture they grew up with."

Kabir eventually crossed the room toward her aunt and bowed slightly — not out of obligation, but affinity. "I'm glad you're here," he said, sincerely.

She regarded him with that famously vague gaze of hers, as though she were not entirely certain which planet she currently occupied. Then she nodded. “You laugh with your eyes,” she said. “That is rare in serious men.”

He blinked, surprised.

She continued, drifting as though this were all idle conversation. “Flying does one thing to people — it teaches them that falling is possible. I’ve learned that from Nihal. But staying on the ground with dignity — that is its own education. You seem to be learning both.”

Kabir smiled — quietly touched. “Thank you.”

She waved the gratitude away like a mosquito. “I only observe. I do not compliment. Compliments are invitations to vanity.”

He chuckled, and she wandered off to inspect a floral arrangement that, in her opinion, stood at a slightly confused angle.

Near the drinks table, Aditi’s father found himself again in conversation with the man who had earlier mentioned promotions. He was speaking softly, confidentially — not gossiping, exactly — just analyzing, like someone who paid attention to hierarchies and weather forecasts in roughly equal measure.

“Trust like this from the IAF,” he said, lifting his glass just enough to indicate significance, “isn’t casual. They don’t hand WAC posts without thinking three times. Especially to someone younger than the average.”

Aditi’s father nodded, thoughtful. “It means they’ve seen leadership. Calm under pressure. And good judgment — both in the air and behind desks. The Sukhoi flying only sealed it. That kind of experience doesn’t leave a man.”

There was a pause.

“And,” the man added almost gently, “it usually means someone senior has an eye on him. Future commands. Bigger responsibilities. They like him.” The words didn’t inflate Aditi’s father. They steadied him.

He thought, unexpectedly, of his daughter’s childhood — her stubborn kindness, her fierce sense of fairness. He had once worried she would be taken advantage of by someone who mistook gentleness for weakness.

Looking at Kabir now — laughing with friends, listening carefully to elders, touching his wife’s shoulder lightly as she greeted guests — he realized the risk

wasn't here. This was partnership, not conquest. "Thank you," he said simply. The man nodded, as if they had completed a discreet transaction.

Somewhere between photographs and blessings, Aditi finally found a sliver of stillness. She stood near a pillar, half-shadowed by marigolds, watching families merge like rivers that had always wanted the same direction.

Kabir joined her for a moment, offering a glass of water. "You're doing great," he murmured.

She smiled. "So are you."

He looked amused. "I just have to exist. You have to smile at twenty-seven cameras with different emotional expectations."

She laughed, because it was true. And then — fleeting as a whisper — Angad rose in her thoughts again.

She remembered how love had once meant breathlessness, urgent declarations, fights that felt like battlefields. She remembered believing that certainty should feel like adrenaline. With Kabir, certainty felt like oxygen — invisible, essential, untheatrical. She knew which version she could live inside.

Kabir noticed the brief inwardness in her gaze — not what caused it, only that it existed. He didn't ask. He just brushed her hand — a tiny reassurance: I am here. You are free. Both things can happen together. Aloud he said, "I love you, Aditi. Every step of the way."

She smiled.

As dinner began, conversation loosened further. Elderly relatives found chairs and stories. Younger guests hovered by the dessert tables in strategic anticipation. Children resumed running patterns, this time with mithai as fuel.

The mandap glowed softer now — no longer an altar, but a memory stitched into the evening.

Near the end, as Aditi and Kabir stood together to receive final blessings, something shifted in the atmosphere — less noise, more awareness.

Kabir's mother placed her hands lightly on Aditi's head — as though crowning her not with expectation, but with protection.

His father hugged her — not stiffly, not ceremonially — but with the kindness of someone who had decided she was now permanently under his worry.

Aditi's mother embraced Kabir — longer than expected — and when she stepped back, she looked at him with quiet insistence: "Take care of each other," she said. "Not in the dramatic ways. In the daily ones."

He nodded. "I will."

Her aunt waited until the others had finished. She stepped forward, not touching either of them at first, simply studying. Finally, she placed one hand each on their shoulders, connecting them lightly. "Marriage," she said very gently, "is simply two people promising to notice. The world will try to fill your days with noise so you forget to notice." She smiled. "Keep noticing. The rest survives on its own."

Kabir bowed his head a little — unexpectedly moved. Aditi blinked away sudden, thin tears.

Then her aunt released them, wandering off again as though nothing significant had been said.

As they prepared to leave for the final departure ritual, the venue hummed with that particular mix of celebration and impending fragility. Bags had appeared. Shoes gathered themselves near doors.

Kabir stood near the car, talking quietly to one of his friends, who clapped him on the back with mischievous warmth. "Congratulations, man," he said. "You managed the biggest operation of your life without a briefing slide."

Kabir laughed.

Aditi joined them, smiling, and the friend bowed theatrically, half-joking, half-sincere. "We'll take care of him when he forgets to sleep," he told her. "You take care of him when he pretends not to need rest."

She nodded, grateful — not for the words, but for the promise buried inside them.

Then it was time.

Her parents hugged her — differently than ever before — not with fear of losing her, but with the shock of realizing love stretches without tearing.

Her aunt kissed her hair. "Go," she whispered. "Grow new rooms."

And then — amid petals, eyes shining, murmured blessings, laughter that cracked into tears — she stepped into the car beside Kabir. The door closed.

For a heartbeat, neither spoke. The noise outside felt suddenly far away — like a story moving into epilogue while a new book quietly opened.

Kabir finally looked at her, smiling — unguarded, openly happy. “Ready?” he asked.

Aditi thought of everything at once: The fire. The rituals. Her parents’ faces. Her aunt’s strange, wise sentences. Kabir’s steady hand. Her own breath. Angad.

And then — simply and honestly — “Yes.”

The car began to move. The lights of the venue receded, and ahead, the road stretched — ordinary, unremarkable, perfect. Aditi leaned back, letting the motion carry her.

Chapter 13

The air was dense with the sweetness of roses and tuberoses, the kind that seeped into skin and cloth and refused to leave. It lay heavy over the white sheets in delicate scatterings, a scene meant to look touched by grace, by blessing, by love that had been witnessed and sanctioned and blessed again.

Aditi brushed at the last stray petals, irritated despite herself. They looked beautiful from afar, ceremonial and perfect — but up close they scratched, crumpled, clung to her fingers and snagged on the fabric of the sheets. Beauty, she thought dimly, was rarely practical.

She smoothed a crease that immediately sprang back.

Her hands wouldn't stay still. It wasn't nerves, she told herself.

It was exhaustion. The rituals, the noise, the endless stream of relatives with damp palms and earnest blessings, the laughter that had felt too loud, too bright, as if it were happening to someone else.

This room was supposed to feel like refuge. Instead, it felt staged.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, inhaled the floral sweetness, and tried to summon calm.

The handle turned. Kabir came in a moment later.

And the room changed.

He didn't stride in like a groom performing his final duty of the night. He walked like a man entering the place he had always meant to reach. A quiet confidence rippled through him, as natural as breathing. His deep teal kurta lay across his frame like something made precisely for him — not embellished

for spectacle, but powerful because of how simply it held him. The layered jacket with rust-toned paisleys caught the light, threads glinting like embers when he moved.

He looked regal, yes – but not distant.

He looked like certainty.

For one suspended moment, she saw him not as a groom, not as a man stepping into ritual, but as Kabir – the man who laughed easily, who listened without interruption, who believed in order, honor, quiet care. The man who had chosen her despite complications and doubts and shadows she herself hadn't fully outrun.

He smelled faintly of cologne and a whisper of whisky. He smiled.

And her composure cracked open like brittle glass.

He didn't stop to speak.

He crossed the space between them in three purposeful strides and gathered her to him, the kiss arriving not as request, but as relief – as if he had been holding back for months and finally allowed himself to exhale.

Heat surged between them, a tide that rose and erased everything else. Aditi's hands moved instinctively, fingers curling into the fabric at his shoulders. His mouth was fierce, full, hungry in a way that should have frightened her – and instead only anchored her.

Never breaking the kiss, his powerful hands locked around her waist, effortlessly lifting her, guiding her backward until her spine met the smooth, cool expanse of the bed. Aditi responded with a raw, guttural noise, her hands tearing at the silk of his kurta, her fingers burying themselves in the thick weight of his hair, hauling him down until their hearts beat against each other through the fabric.

"Aditi... I need to be inside you," he groaned, the words ragged gravel against the sensitive skin of her neck.

He pulled back, a flash of teal fabric, the violent zip of a seam straining as he dragged the kurta over his head—a sound that was the true prelude to their haste. Her lehenga fell away in a pool of discarded silk, leaving her body luminous and exposed, a stark, beautiful woman on the pristine sheets.

He returned instantly, pulling her hard against him. Their bare skin met in a shockwave of consuming heat, his muscled chest scalding the soft swell of hers. His lips left her mouth, tracing a feverish path to the vulnerable curve of her shoulder. Her breath hitched—an animal sound of pure, immediate physical response.

He pulled back slightly, searching her face.

"You're breathtaking," he said quietly, reverently. "Every time I look at you, I feel like I'm standing at the edge of something enormous."

"Then don't stand there," she whispered, pulling him back down. "Come closer."

His answering smile was quiet, almost shy.

A dark, intoxicating smile curved his lips. His fingers began their slow, deliberate descent, trailing fire across her hipbone, igniting the flesh in their wake. She clamped her legs around his waist, using the leverage to pull him fully into her space. She anchored her hands on his shoulders, kissing him with a fierce, possessive hunger that was purely carnal.

Slowly, deliberately, he moved over her, his hand tracing the searing heat of her inner thigh. Aditi gasped, a shudder ripping through her as his touch became more intimate, finding her with slow, devastating precision. She bit her lip until she tasted copper, a soft, involuntary moan escaping at the focused, escalating pressure.

"You're eager..." she managed, the words laced with a breathless triumph.

"I have been fighting this for months," he grated out, his jaw tight. "I held back out of fear of losing you. Now I'm done being scared. I want to lose myself in you. I want to bury every doubt in this."

"Then kiss me," she breathed, her hips already beginning a slow, instinctive movement.

He did. His mouth traced a line past her navel, his lips and tongue unmaking her until her pleasure soared like liquid lightning. She threaded her fingers through his hair, her hips beginning to buck, straining to meet him. Her breath was coming in ragged, desperate sobs; every inch of her was a taut wire waiting to be overloaded.

"I need you so badly, Aditi," he confessed, pulling up to look at her, his face carved with hunger and a terrifyingly pure love.

"Now," she pleaded, eyes squeezed shut, her voice choked with a need that felt like dying. "Kabir—now."

When they finally connected, the sensation was a searing, electric fusion. Their movements found rhythm without thought, as if their bodies had been waiting for permission. The world narrowed to breath and skin and the way his voice softened when he said her name, again and again, like an anchor.

"I want to taste every second of this," she whispered, her hands clawing lightly at the tense muscle of his back.

"My thoughts exactly," he returned, his voice strained with the effort of holding back his own release. He locked his hands beneath her hips, lifting her slightly, deepening the intensity until she could feel the very pulse of him.

"You feel like home," he murmured, forehead resting against hers. "Like this is exactly where I'm meant to be."

He whispered her name again, softer this time.

Aditi closed her eyes. She felt warmth blooming through her, dissolving the tightness she had carried all day. Every worry she had managed, every mask she had worn, softened under the way he held himself back just enough to let her set the rhythm, the pace, the yes.

For once, she felt not pursued — but received. And she let go.

She let go of the guests and the expectations. Her mind emptied into the rush of sensation and closeness and the simple ache of wanting to be wanted.

The moment climbed — slow, shimmering. "Kabir," she whispered.

A tremor rippled through him at the sound of his name.

She arched, breath catching. Thought dissolved entirely.

And in that empty, vulnerable space — reflex spoke. "Angad, I—"

The name slipped out like a reflexive sigh — unbidden, automatic, not even shaped by conscious thought. It was one sound. Just one. But it cracked reality open.

Kabir froze.

Every movement stilled. Not slowed. Stopped.

The silence that followed was unnatural. It had weight. It spread through the room, flattening the air, sucking out heat and meaning and breath.

Aditi's mind snapped back into awareness in a violent rush. She felt it before she understood it — the sudden void of his body against hers, the way his muscles had locked rigid beneath her hands. She opened her eyes slowly, as if delaying reality might erase it.

But reality waited, exact and merciless.

He withdrew. Not with anger. With absence.

The space between them widened into something vast and unbearable. Her heart slammed painfully against her ribs. She dragged in air, her throat tight, words scrambling and crashing before they could form.

He sat up, back turned, as if gathering the fragments of himself required physical rearrangement. The sound of his voice, when it came, sliced through the quiet. "Angad?"

It wasn't loud. It wasn't accusing. It was disbelief — bewildered and terribly calm.

Her stomach turned. "I—Kabir—" The words stumbled out, shaking. "I didn't mean... it. I wasn't thinking. It just—came out. It doesn't mean anything."

He didn't move. Didn't look at her. Only his shoulders changed — tension rippling and holding, as if the effort to remain composed demanded every bit of strength he possessed.

She pressed the sheet to her chest, clutching it as if it might tether her to something solid. "It was my past," she whispered desperately. "Something unfinished in my head. Like a reflex. It wasn't about now. I swear. You're here. You're my reality."

She reached out.

He flinched.

Not dramatically — just enough.

Enough to make her hand drop back into her lap as though she'd touched something scorching.

"Angad," he said again, softer this time. The name sounded foreign in his mouth. "That's what you said."

He stood, pulled his pants on — slowly — and crossed to the sideboard with precise, measured steps, as if sudden movement might shatter something. His back — broad, familiar — looked entirely different.

Not strong. Not reassuring. Just... alone.

He poured whisky into a glass. The faint clink of crystal seemed too loud. His hand trembled, and the decanter bumped the rim with a hollow knock, betraying the shake he refused to show anywhere else.

Aditi's pulse pounded in her ears. She rushed after him, the sheet dragging behind her like a shroud. "Kabir, please listen! The stress of the wedding... it was just a memory that surfaced because I was overwhelmed! It doesn't mean anything. He is a ghost, you are the reality! I love you."

"Aditi," he said without turning around, "please stop."

"I didn't want him," she said desperately. "I want you. Tonight—everything tonight—was real."

He took a long swallow, then another.

When he finally turned, his face was closed in a way she had never seen before—not anger, not accusation, but something quieter and far more frightening.

"Get some sleep," he said. "We'll talk later." His voice was flat, stripped of all colour.

The words landed like blows because they were gentle.

She shook her head, panic spiraling. "No. No. We need to talk. Right now. You have to believe me. Tonight was real. Everything I felt was—"

"I can't," he interrupted.

Something inside her cracked. "Kabir—"

But he was already walking to the balcony.

The glass door slid closed with a soft whisper, a sound somehow more final than a slammed one.

Outside, the night air was cool, edged with distant music and laughter. A string quartet began another sweet, polished melody, and guests somewhere clapped.

Kabir gripped the railing. Hard.

The metal dug into his palms, grounding him through the dizzying rush in his head.

Angad.

The syllables replayed with brutal clarity, untouched by nuance or excuses. Not muffled. Not unclear. Not his name. He closed his eyes. For a few seconds, he felt nothing at all.

Then sensation returned—flooding, layered.

Shock arrived first, sharp and clean. Then humiliation, creeping cold through his chest, threading around his ribs. Beneath that, something far more dangerous brewed — grief so deep it threatened to hollow him out.

He had never considered himself naive.

He knew people came with histories, scars, unfinished stories. He hadn't even asked hers — he didn't think he needed to —and believed Aditi had loved only him now. He had told himself that time and steadiness could build something stronger than what had come before.

He trusted time. He trusted effort. He trusted himself. And tonight — on that bed — he had laid down not just desire, but certainty. He had unguarded himself fully, believing the moment belonged to them alone.

He inhaled sharply, the night air slicing through him. *I'm standing at the edge of something enormous*, he had said earlier.

He hadn't realized how deep the drop could be.

He tried to reason. To explain. *It was stress. A reflex. Not intentional.* The part of him trained to manage crises reached immediately for logic.

But the deeper part refused.

Because the betrayal wasn't merely that she remembered another man.

It was *where* the memory lived — at the precise center of her vulnerability, in the moment he had believed himself uniquely present.

It had surfaced instinctively.

Which meant...

He swallowed hard.

I wasn't alone in that moment. Or in any of those moments.

The realization burned.

He opened his eyes and stared at the city's glittering sprawl. Cars stitched silent lines through the streets. A stray dog barked. Somewhere, fireworks burst into quiet sparks.

Life continued. Unbothered.

He pressed his hand firmly on the cool railing. He had pictured tonight — not in cinematic detail, but as something clean. A threshold. Two adults stepping forward together, carrying their uncertainties but choosing each other anyway.

Instead, he felt like he'd walked into someone else's story mid-sentence, inserted clumsily into a role written for another man.

Am I... replacement?

The word curdled.

He thought of the months leading here — the carefulness, the patience, the quiet hope he rarely voiced. The way he had believed, maybe foolishly, that steadfastness had finally won.

He imagined the wedding photos that would one day hang in frames — smiles, rituals, colors — and wondered how many unseen ghosts stood just outside their edges.

Anger flickered then — brief and scorching. Not the kind that wanted to lash out. The kind rooted in hurt.

Why now? Why here? Why when I finally... trusted?

He tightened his grip on the railing until his knuckles whitened. He didn't doubt that she cared for him. He didn't doubt that she had chosen him. He loved her for her honesty, her intelligence, her ability to see tenderness in serious, composed people.

But love wasn't the wound.

The wound was discovery: that the most intimate, sacred space he had offered — the place where he had dared to believe himself irreplaceable — had proven shared.

And suddenly, he didn't know where to stand.

A flicker of movement inside caught his attention — Aditi, sinking to the floor, clutching the sheet, shoulders bent in on themselves. Her hair had come loose; tuberoses petals clung to her like remnants of a ceremony that had gone wrong.

He closed his eyes again, pain twisting deeper. He didn't want to punish her. He didn't want to walk back in and accuse, demand, rage. He just — couldn't speak yet.

Because if he spoke now, he feared he might say things that would scar beyond repair. Words born of shock more than truth.

He took another breath. The scent of flowers drifted faintly through the gap at the edge of the glass. Sweet. Relentless.

He thought, absurdly, of how he had once loved tuberose — their luminous fragrance, their association with festivals and weddings. Now, the smell curled in his lungs like grief.

For a wild second, he pictured leaving — walking down the steps, out into the night, finding some anonymous bar where no one knew he had been married five hours earlier.

The impulse faded as fast as it came. Running solved nothing. He stayed.

Because beneath the devastation, another truth — softer, no less real — pulsed stubbornly: *He still loved her*. He didn't want to stop. And that terrified him.

Because love made everything harder.

It meant he would have to understand this, walk into the discomfort, unravel it. It meant choosing to have the conversation he was currently avoiding — the honest, messy one.

But not tonight. Not in the rawness of this moment, when her slip felt like proof rather than wound.

He lowered his head, exhaling slowly.

Inside, muffled by glass, he heard a sound — a small, broken sob, quickly stifled. His stomach twisted.

He wasn't indifferent to her pain. Her remorse sounded real — not performance, not manipulation — but desperate, horrified, riddled with self-disgust.

He could imagine what she was telling herself. He knew how merciless she could be with her own mistakes.

He rested his hands flat on the railing, letting the metal's steady firmness anchor him. *Later*, he told himself. *Later, when the name doesn't echo so loudly. When I can speak without bleeding.*

For now, silence was the only boundary he could control.

Inside, the scent of tuberose thickened into something cloying. Aditi pressed her hands to her eyes, trying to steady her breath, but the sobs kept ripping free — uneven, strangled, betraying everything she was trying to contain.

What have I done? The question spiraled through her, relentless.

She hadn't seen it coming — the way old neural pathways could fire under emotion, under intensity. She had believed herself past that chapter. Not untouched by it — but past it.

Yet the moment pleasure had blurred thought, her past had used her mouth like an open door.

And she had shattered the one thing Kabir carried like armor — his quiet dignity.

Her mind replayed the scene again and again — his stillness, the carefulness with which he'd moved away, the precise control that looked nothing like indifference and everything like survival.

She had hurt him in a way he would never dramatize — which somehow made it worse.

Her apologies had spilled too fast, too frantic, tripping over each other until even she heard how hollow they sounded. They weren't hollow — but panic had stripped them of coherence.

She wanted to crawl across the room and beg. She wanted to rewind time. She wanted — absurdly — to slap herself. Instead, she sat on the floor and pressed her forehead against her knees.

Tonight was supposed to be their beginning. Now, it felt like she had carried the funeral of something unresolved into the heart of their marriage.

A knock of thought struck her, brutal: *It wasn't the mistake.*

It was what the mistake revealed — the raw, unhealed fragment lodged inside her somewhere, denying burial. She had believed herself healed because she no longer cried. Because she could talk about Angad with distance. Because she had looked toward the future without flinching.

But apparently, in the architecture of her mind, some rooms remained unrenovated, untouched, still echoing with his name.

Shame slid down her spine like ice. How could she expect Kabir to trust a heart that still contained trapdoors she herself didn't fully understand?

She glanced toward the balcony. His silhouette stood rigid against the night decked in moonlight — a lonely shape. She wanted to rush to him, to force conversation, to spill every self-excoriating truth until he believed her remorse.

But something about the set of his shoulders restrained her. He needed distance. Space. He wasn't punishing her. He was surviving.

And for the first time, she realized that loving him might mean respecting his silence — not because he was indifferent, but because he felt too deeply.

Her sobs softened into quiet tremors.

She rose eventually — slow, unsteady — and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the wilted flowers.

One tuberose petal slid off the sheet and landed on the floor with a small, soundless fall, like an ending no one had heard.

The room felt different now. Not ruined. But fragile. Like a place where something precious had cracked — not shattered entirely, but enough that it would require careful hands, deliberate conversation, time, humility.

She lay back slowly, pulling the sheet over herself, and stared at the ceiling. Sleep felt impossible. But she closed her eyes anyway.

Outside, Kabir remained at the railing, still as a sentry.

He listened to the faint city noise, the echo of music, the echo — louder still — of a single misplaced name. It would be a long night. Not full of fury. Not full of accusations.

Just long — stretched between two people who loved each other, yet suddenly found themselves separated by an unexpected abyss neither had seen coming.

The glass door between them was thin. Yet tonight, it might as well have been a wall.

And both understood — instinctively, painfully — that whatever future they built would have to reckon with what had cracked here.

But not tonight.

Kabir finally loosened his grip on the railing and let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He didn't walk back in. He didn't leave.

He simply stayed — suspended — somewhere between the man he had been at the threshold of the night and the one he would have to learn how to be after this.

Behind him, the room smelled of flowers and ruin. Before him, the city glittered — indifferent and endless.

And between those two worlds, he stood quietly, heart aching, trying — with trembling patience — to understand how a single word could redraw the entire map of trust.

Chapter 14

Dawn arrived without permission.

It did not creep gently or paint the room in tender gold the way poems suggested. It bled in through the gaps in the curtains like reality intruding upon a fragile lie.

Light softened the room, revealing the aftermath in ordinary colors — the scatter of petals that now looked wilted rather than romantic, the discarded clothes on the floor, the faint fog on the glass door leading to the balcony.

And Aditi's eyes opened all at once. Not with rest. With memory.

Her first conscious thought was not of the marriage, the rituals, the laughter of the previous day.

It was a single, merciless recollection of how Kabir had gone still.

Her chest tightened instantly. Her breath stuttered, as though her lungs had to relearn the concept of air.

She turned her head slightly. The pillow beside her was untouched.

A faint impression where he might have lain never existed. The sheet remained smooth on that side, as if the night itself had refused to acknowledge his presence. He hadn't come back to bed.

For a moment, a childish part of her — the part that still believed disasters could be undone by refusing to look — wanted to close her eyes and burrow into the covers. But denial was no longer an option.

The silence around her was no longer romantic. It was careful. Strained. The kind that teetered.

She sat up slowly. Her body felt heavy — not fatigued but weighted by something that had settled into bone. She pulled the sheet around herself, instinctively modest, though she was alone, then paused.

The faint sound of the balcony door sliding open broke the quiet.

He was still there.

The realization brought a complicated rush — not relief exactly, but something steadier: *He didn't leave.*

She rose, wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, and stood for a moment beside the bed, collecting courage the way one collects breath before diving underwater.

Face it, she told herself.

Pretending normal would be worse. Her bare feet crossed the carpet, making no sound. She hesitated at the balcony door, hand hovering over the handle.

He stood where she had left him — or perhaps he had moved at some point only to return. He was no longer in wedding finery. Sometime during the night, he had pulled on a plain shirt and trousers, the fabric rumpled, sleeves rolled up unevenly.

He looked like a man who had fought sleep and lost the battle without resting.

The city below lay muted, morning-soft — faint sounds of kitchen vessels, early voices, birds staking territorial claims across rooftops. A cool breeze teased the curtains.

Kabir's hands rested on the railing, fingers curled loosely now rather than clamped. His shoulders were relaxed — outwardly, at least. But his posture had a stillness that suggested control, not ease.

Aditi opened the door.

The faint scrape of glass against its track sounded too loud. He turned slightly, acknowledging her presence without truly facing her. "Morning," he said.

The word landed gently. Not warm. Not cold. Polite.

She swallowed. "Have you slept at all?"

"A little."

She didn't believe him. The faint hollows under his eyes betrayed him more honestly. But she didn't correct him. Not yet.

She stepped out, the early air wrapping cool around her skin. She joined him at the railing but kept a small distance, aware of the line between them.

For a while, they simply stood.

The quiet stretched — not exactly awkward, but uncertain. Like two people standing at either end of a damaged bridge, waiting to see if it would hold.

He finally spoke. "We should talk."

Relief and dread collided inside her. "Yes."

He drew a breath — measured — as if arranging his thoughts into orderly rows before releasing them. "I've been trying," he said slowly, "to understand what last night meant."

Her instinct was to rush into apology — to fill the space with remorse until it drowned the event. But something in his tone — cautious, deliberate — urged patience. She stayed silent.

He continued. "I know people come with histories. I've always known that about you. And I have never expected you to erase yours simply because I'm here now." He paused. "I believed that maturity meant accepting that."

She nodded faintly, but the motion felt fragile.

"I also know," he said quietly, "that slips happen. The brain stores things in strange ways. Reflex is not the same as intention."

His reasonableness cut deeper than any anger. Because it held disappointment — not drama.

"But," he added, voice thinning, "there's a part of me that keeps circling back to the same question — the part that won't obey logic." He finally turned fully toward her. "And that question is: In the moment I thought was ours — was I truly there for you? Or was I standing where someone else once stood?"

Her throat tightened painfully.

"I don't say this to punish you," he went on. "I say it because I don't know how to navigate that feeling yet. It... unsettles everything I thought I understood."

Aditi had expected anger. She had prepared speeches to counter accusation, to defend herself against blame. She had not prepared for this – the gentleness that demanded truth rather than surrender.

She exhaled shakily. “You were there,” she said. “You were. I wasn’t reliving anything. I wasn’t thinking about him. I swear I wasn’t. I didn’t even know that memory still had such reflex inside me.” Her voice wavered. “It shocked me too.”

He listened – genuinely listened – but his eyes searched as though measuring each word against the wound. “And yet,” he said softly, “when everything fell away and instinct spoke, it chose his name, not mine.”

There was no bitterness in the statement. Only quiet devastation.

She pressed a trembling hand to the railing. “It was...involuntary,” she added desperately, grasping at the word as though it might save her.

He turned to face her. The look in his eyes hollowed her out.

There was no fury there. No sharpness. No desire to wound her in return. There was only pain—deep, bruised, devastating in its quiet. Pain that had already settled into him, already begun to calcify.

“Involuntary,” he repeated softly. “Do you know what that word means, Aditi? Come on, you’re an editor!”

The word sounded different in his mouth. He tasted it, weighed it.

“Involuntary means it came from a place beyond control,” he said. “So tell me, Aditi—where did that place come from?”

Her throat closed.

“Because last night,” he went on, his voice steady but strained, “I was giving you everything I had. Every hope I’ve carried for us. Every belief I have in love lasting. And the name that came out of you—the one that broke through everything—was not mine.”

Each word landed with deliberate clarity.

“It was the name of a man you loved. A man you were intimate with. A man whose body you knew. A man who is not me.”

She felt as though the floor had dropped away beneath her. Tears slid down her face unchecked, hot and humiliating. She realized, with a small internal jolt, that this conversation would not be about defending herself. It would be about *understanding* herself.

And inviting him into that process.

She took a breath. “I loved him,” she said — the words plain, unadorned, not romanticized. “Deeply. Foolishly. Intensely. The kind of love that feels like gravity until it collapses and takes you with it.” She swallowed. “And when it ended, it didn’t end gently. It ended like a building falling.”

Kabir’s jaw flexed, but he did not interrupt.

“For a long time after,” she continued, “I lived inside that wreckage. I analyzed every conversation, every fight, every moment — looking for where it had cracked. The habit became instinct. His name became shorthand for pain I hadn’t processed.” Her eyes burned. “I thought I had cleaned it out. I thought time had done its work.”

She looked at him then, nakedly honest. “But when the wedding started closing in—when everything became permanent—I couldn’t stop thinking of the what-ifs. Not because I want him. But because I never closed that door properly.”

He absorbed this. His expression shifted — not softening entirely, but acquiring complexity. Pain interwove with empathy, confusion with reluctant understanding. “I believe you,” he said eventually.

It surprised her more than if he hadn’t.

“But believing why it happened,” he continued, “does not automatically erase what it *felt* like when it happened.”

She nodded. She knew that distinction mattered.

He looked out at the city again, choosing his words carefully. “When you said his name, it didn’t feel like competition. It felt like erasure. As if—or so it seemed in that instant—my place in your life was conditional. That I might always be... measured against someone invisible.”

He breathed out. “And what frightened me most wasn’t anger. It was the thought that perhaps — without either of us realizing it — I have built my future on a foundation where I’m always second to something unfinished.”

The honesty shook her. Not because it was cruel. Because it wasn't.

She stepped closer — just enough that the distance between them narrowed from emotional vastness to something more manageable.

"Kabir," she said quietly, "you are not second. You are the choice I made after knowing what breakage feels like. You are the safer, stabler, braver decision. Not because you're unscarred — but because you don't abandon."

He looked at her sharply. "Safer?"

She froze — realizing the implication.

He caught it too. "So that's what I am?" he asked softly. "Safety? Stability?"

Not sarcastic. Not defensive. Curious — and hurting.

She winced. "That's not what I meant. Or — maybe it is, partly — but not the way it sounds."

"Explain," he said, still calm.

She grappled for clarity. "With Angad," she said slowly, "I loved the chaos. The rush. The adrenaline of never quite knowing. It felt cinematic — and I mistook volatility for depth. With you, there is no drama. There is presence. Constancy. It took me time to understand that this is the rarer thing."

She hesitated. "But perhaps," she admitted softly, "some tiny part of me still equates intensity with ownership. And when that part surfaced last night, it called from habit, not desire."

His eyes softened — only slightly. "I don't want to be the consolation prize of maturity," he said gently. "I don't want to be the man someone grows into simply because they're tired of heartache. I want to be loved fiercely — not quietly tolerated because I'm dependable. Because, Aditi, I know I love you fiercely."

The vulnerability stunned her. It struck her that, beneath his composed exterior, he carried his own fear — one he rarely voiced: the fear of being invisible emotionally, valued for function rather than self.

She moved nearer, until they stood only a breath apart. "You are not my consolation prize," she said fiercely. "You are my correction — not of love itself, but of the way I understand love. You are what I choose not because you are

safe — but because you are *true*. Because when everything is stripped away, you are the person I trust my life with.”

Her voice broke. “And I hate that last night made you question that.”

Kabir closed his eyes. When Kabir opened his eyes again, they were glassy but dry. “I love you,” he said simply.

The words were devastating in their gentleness.

“I love you because I love you,” he went on. “Not because you’re unbroken. Not because you’re easy. But because nothing you’ve said takes that away. And nothing you’ve said makes anything any better.”

Her chest heaved with a sob she couldn’t stop.

“But,” he continued, and the word fell like a guillotine, “I will not be your husband in truth until you are done loving another man.”

She froze.

“There are too many people bound up in this marriage,” he said. “Families. Histories. Faith. I won’t walk away publicly. I won’t humiliate you.”

He stepped closer—not touching her, but close enough that she could feel the weight of his presence, the restraint it took for him not to reach out.

“But don’t mistake that for acceptance,” he said quietly. “You need to choose. Not out of fear. Not out of exhaustion. Truthfully.”

Her voice collapsed into a whisper. “I can be your wife in every way. Let me have time. Please.”

Kabir’s jaw tightened.

“I will give you time,” he said at last. “Because I can see your pain. And because loving you is not something I can simply stop.”

He turned toward the door and turned back again.

“But understand this,” he added. “I will not compete with a ghost. I will wait—but I will not beg.”

He paused, his hand on the handle. “We have a day ahead. Families. Rituals. Smiles.” The faintest grimace flickered. “We don’t have to pretend everything is perfect. But we do need to function.”

His voice softened, just barely. "And you will not cry in public. Not because you don't hurt—but because this is ours to survive. Alone."

Then he walked away to the bathroom. Aditi heard the shower running. Sunlight poured over her like an accusation, and she understood with brutal clarity that this—this dignified withdrawal, this measured withholding—was far worse than rage.

Chapter 15

The day after the wedding did not feel like the beginning of a marriage.

It felt like a pause. Not silence — pauses had breath, intention, the promise of continuation. This felt like something suspended — a sentence left unfinished mid-air.

Aditi woke late, not from indulgence but exhaustion. The previous night and early morning had left her hollow in a way sleep didn't refill. The room smelled faintly of flowers and unfamiliar detergent. The bed was neat on his side again; the crease from where he had slept — if he had slept — had been smoothed away.

The house stirred faintly: muffled footsteps, a kettle whistling, someone calling for sugar from the kitchen. Domestic sounds. Ordinary sounds. Sounds that should have soothed.

Instead, they made her feel like a guest overstaying.

She sat at the edge of the bed and brushed her hair slowly, movements deliberate, rehearseable. The sindoor line glowed bold and unwavering against her scalp — a bright streak, almost arrogant in its confidence. She studied it in the mirror.

There was no tremor in her hand as she adjusted it.

It grounded her — not as possession, not as surrender — but as a line she had chosen to step across. A marker not of ownership, but of commitment as she understood it.

Yet the mirror held more than her reflection. It also reflected absence. Kabir wasn't in the room.

He had left early. Someone had mentioned it casually at breakfast when she finally emerged, wrapped in a simple kurta, her bangles chiming softly as she poured tea.

"He's gone out," his mother had said, not unkindly. "Some work — and then he'll meet friends, I think. He said he'd be back late."

Work. Friends. Late. Simple words. None of them dramatic. But each landed with the weight of a decision made elsewhere, without her.

Aditi managed a nod, smiled when she was supposed to. She answered gentle questions about how she had slept, whether she needed anything, if the room temperature was comfortable. She thanked them. She watched the way they looked at her — kind, curious, measuring their welcome carefully, as though she were made of porcelain and truth all at once. They were not unwelcoming.

If anything, they went out of their way to make her feel included — offering snacks, recounting small family anecdotes, folding her into the edges of conversation.

The only thing missing was Kabir.

And absence, when it belongs to someone you love, becomes its own presence — solid, undeniable.

By late morning she had been shown where the snacks were kept, how the cupboards were organized, which drawer in the pantry was always stocked with biscuits. She memorized these details with polite attention. She wanted to belong. She also did not know where to place herself.

Around noon, his mother stopped by with a pile of soft, carefully ironed sarees. "These are mine," she said, grinning. "But they're more your style. Borrow until you're bored."

It was warm, effortless generosity. Aditi smiled, genuinely. Gratitude came easily. Relief did not.

Somewhere, beneath layers of politeness and routine, a quiet ache pulsed steady — the ache of knowing there was a conversation still breathing between them, unfinished, waiting like a storm that refused to announce itself.

Kabir did not go to base. He had said he might, when his mother asked, but he had no business there. Instead, he walked. He left the house with the careful steadiness of someone who needed movement more than destination.

Delhi stretched around him in winter sunlight – gentle, pale, dust-soft. The air carried the faint metallic taste of the city, rickshaw bells, the occasional flare of roasting peanuts from street vendors. Leaves rustled overhead, broad and tired.

He kept his hands in his pockets. His shoulders were straight, his pace unremarkable. He looked like any man taking some air.

Inside, the storm remained disciplined – contained the way pilots are taught to contain fear: acknowledge it, categorize it, place it on a shelf, deal with it when the aircraft is stable.

He had not slept properly. He had stood under the shower that morning until the water ran lukewarm, listening to the hollow rhythm on tile, replaying her voice, her honesty, the accidental cruelty of a reflex.

Involuntary.

He loved her. That sentence was not in question. If anything, love made it worse – expanding every hurt instead of dulling it.

He boarded a metro just because it was there, rode two stations, got off, walked again. The city felt easier than the house. The noise diluted the sharp edges of thought.

Around afternoon, he met his friends – pilots, navigators, a WSO who had flown with him once over the western sector. They gathered at a quiet bar that pretended it was a café until evening, its lights dim, its walls lined with framed photographs of aircraft that looked generic enough to be safe.

Someone clapped him on the back. Someone joked about “married life.” Someone ordered beer without asking what he wanted.

Their affection was real – not sentimental, not prying. The way defence friendships often were: built on proximity, sharpened by risk, softened by a shared understanding that life could change abruptly.

They talked about postings. About a near-miss landing someone had seen. About how WAC command procedures had been tweaked recently. They laughed about base politics.

Kabir laughed along. He did not mention the night. He did not speak about the reflexive name that had not been his. He did not tell them he had cancelled his leave request on his way there — fingers steady as he typed the email to his superior, citing “personal adjustment needs” with formal courtesy.

The honeymoon plan — the one he had researched quietly, wanting to show her mountains she hadn't seen — evaporated between keystrokes. There would be time later, he told himself. Or there wouldn't. He refused to examine which version stung more.

By the second drink, one of them lifted his glass in mock solemnity. “To wives who tolerate us,” he declared. “And to husbands who survive wedding logistics.”

Laughter stirred again. Kabir smiled — a real expression, but faint. He drank, and the bitterness on his tongue felt ordinary, manageable, unlike the ache lodged deeper in his chest that refused to leave.

They stayed longer than planned. The conversation settled into easy loops. At one point, the navigator beside him nudged gently. “You okay?” he asked, low enough not to be overheard.

Kabir considered lying and dismissed it — not out of nobility, but exhaustion. “I will be,” he said.

No details. No explanation. The truth, narrowed into something small and carryable. The other man accepted it with a nod, the way pilots accept turbulent readings — acknowledged, logged, not dramatized.

Later, as evening washed the sky into bruise-colored purple, Kabir stepped outside. The city hummed around him. He leaned against a wall, closed his eyes briefly, and tried to imagine the version of the day where he had gone back home, spent time with his wife, spoken openly, begun healing.

Instead, he imagined her sitting in that house, surrounded by kindness she could not fully access, waiting without accusing, hurting without spectacle.

The thought pierced — almost enough to make him turn around immediately. Almost.

He stayed where he was and texted briefly: *Be back late. Don't wait up.*

Polite. Informational. Distant.

He pressed send and hated himself a fraction more for how easy coldness could become when you were trying not to bleed.

The message arrived while Aditi sat on the edge of the bed folding dupattas just to keep her hands busy. The phone buzzed, the screen lit, his name appearing like a minor mercy she didn't deserve.

She opened it. Read. Read again. *Don't wait up.* No accusation. No warmth. No question.

Her throat tightened anyway. She typed a reply, erased it, typed again. *Okay. Drive safe.*

She considered adding a heart. A smile. Something that suggested connection. She didn't. There are moments when gestures begin to feel like trespass.

She placed the phone face down on the table and lay back for a while, staring at the ceiling fan slowly dividing the room into rotating wedges.

She wished, irrationally, for anger. Anger she understood: it had edges, rules, volume. You could argue with it, soothe it, confront it.

This careful restraint – this dignified retreat – felt like being left in a room where all the doors were open and none of them were exits.

Dinner passed with conversation, with laughter that wasn't hers. She ate, swallowed, contributed where necessary. His parents asked after her parents. Plans for the reception were discussed with practical enthusiasm – seating arrangements, photographers, whether the buffet should include an extra paneer dish. Her name was mentioned frequently, affectionately, as part of these logistical currents.

By the time she returned to the bedroom, fatigue pressed against her in quiet waves. She changed into night clothes, folded her wedding bangles into a velvet-lined box, and sat with her knees drawn up, gazing out the balcony door.

The city glittered at a distance – indifferent, honest.

When Kabir finally came in, it was past midnight.

His step was careful, as though he didn't want to wake anything – not the house, not the fragile quiet between them. He smelled faintly of beer and the outside air. He paused when he saw her still awake.

"You didn't sleep," he said. It wasn't reproach. Just observation.

"I lay down," she answered. "Sleep didn't happen."

He nodded. Removed his shoes. Loosened his collar. He felt watched, not in an intrusive way, but in a way that made conscience uncomfortable.

"I cancelled the honeymoon," he said after a beat. "And the leave."

The words were delivered matter-of-factly, as if he were reporting a weather change.

Her heart dropped. "You... already did?"

"Yes."

"Without talking to me?"

His jaw worked once. "It seemed kinder not to plan something we're not ready for."

She swallowed. "We could have decided together."

He looked at her then — not harshly, but with something close to resignation. "Decision implies equal footing," he said quietly. "Right now, we're not standing on the same ground."

The sentence landed like rain — soft, cold. She opened her mouth, closed it again. Arguments fluttered and died. *He's protecting himself*, she realized. Not punishing her. Just retreating into a version of control.

"All right," she said at last, voice steady because dignity can be a life raft. "If that's what you feel is best."

He nodded slightly. "Thank you."

The courtesy made everything worse.

They slept — or pretended to. Two separate islands on one shared bed.

At dawn, when light seeped in again, they did not talk about the night. They moved around each other gently — like colleagues, careful not to disturb paperwork.

The house brightened with activity as the day progressed. Florists arrived. Someone argued softly about lighting. A decorator spread fabric samples across the dining table like battle maps, comparing shades of ivory that all looked identical to Aditi.

Family members came and went – cousins, uncles, neighbors with trays of sweets wrapped in crackling cellophane. Compliments flowed unprompted. “You’re glowing!” “Marriage suits you!” “She looks so settled already.” “She is so ridiculously beautiful. Imagine how good-looking their children would be.”

Aditi smiled, said thank you, laughed lightly when required. Inside, she learned an entirely different skill: holding herself together not with lies, but with pauses between truths.

Kabir was everywhere and nowhere – discussing logistics with his father, making calls, stepping out to check on the venue. When their eyes met across the room, he always acknowledged her – a faint nod, a small upturn of his mouth. Respectable. Presentable. Cold only because she remembered what warmth felt like.

They exchanged words, but not conversations. “Tea?” he asked at one point, passing by.

“No, thank you,” she said softly.

He nodded. Walked on. Even politeness can become a wound when you love the person using it as armor.

Chapter 16

The reception hall shimmered even before anyone arrived.

It wasn't ostentation — it was precision. The community hall owned by the Indian Air Force had been transformed with disciplined elegance: rows of lights positioned with military neatness, flowers arranged in quiet symmetry, the stage raised just enough to command attention without arrogance.

There was pride in this place — the kind that belonged less to walls and more to the histories that passed through them.

By evening, the air had that expectant quality receptions acquire — like breath held collectively.

Kabir and Aditi arrived almost at the same time as the first wave of guests.

He stepped out first. The suit was dark — not black, but deeper than charcoal, the fabric absorbing and reflecting light with intentional subtlety. It fit him the way clothes fit men in photographs meant for magazines. The shoulders lay perfectly, the waist tapered with quiet authority, the lines falling clean. The collar framed his jaw. The tie sat precise.

He did not look like a groom. He looked like a man walking onto a red carpet — good-looking, composed, charismatic, dangerously self-contained. Someone nearby murmured, “He could be in Hollywood,” with a grin.

Kabir heard it and smiled — a small, dismissive curve of his mouth — the smile he reserved for compliments that required acknowledgment but not belief.

Aditi stepped out beside him. And for a moment the conversations around them softened into breath. Her saree was silk — not gaudy, not glitter-drowned,

but heavy with quiet opulence. The color hovered somewhere between molten gold and the pale glow of lamps at dusk. It clung and cascaded, each fold deliberate. Her blouse had intricate antique embroidery that caught light and returned it in whispers, not shouts.

The antique gold jewelry deepened everything. The necklace sat on her collarbones as if it had always belonged there. The earrings swung gently when she moved, framing her face like punctuation marks of grace. Bangles chimed — not loudly, just enough to remind the world she was newly married. Her hair was drawn back with elegance, the sindoor line a striking red against the careful parting. She wore no expression of conquest or display.

She looked like someone who understood the dignity of being seen — and the danger of it.

Kabir saw her. The sight caught him by surprise, as if he had turned and faced a sudden beam of sunlight. For a breath — one fragile, unguarded breath — desire surged through the ache.

He remembered the softness of her laugh, the way her fingers rested on books when she read, the way her eyes warmed when she trusted him. He remembered how he had imagined this reception — months ago — as a night he would stand beside her with uncomplicated pride.

The pang was sharp — not purely longing, not purely grief. Something knotted between them that love had not yet figured out how to untangle.

He inhaled. And then he tucked the feeling away as cleanly as he had once tucked stray wires in aircraft cockpits. Control was habit. Containment was survival. He turned politely toward arriving guests.

Host first. Man later.

The receiving line formed naturally — guided by decades of wedding muscle memory. Relatives approached, one after another, a flowing sequence of smiles, blessings, embraces, and the delicate exchange of pleasantries.

Kabir excelled at this part.

He listened intently to each elderly relative introducing a cousin he had forgotten or had never met. He bent fractionally when blessing demanded reverence. He remembered names astonishingly well. He cracked small, respectful jokes that made people feel seen rather than performed for.

"Aunty, you are getting more beautiful every day," he said to one woman who clearly hadn't but glowed under the illusion. "Flatterer!" she replied, swatting his arm affectionately.

Beside him, Aditi smiled with practiced warmth. She folded her hands when elders blessed her. She hugged cousins from her side gently, aware of jewelry and silk. She accepted compliments with grace.

"You look like a goddess," one neighbor from her parents' side exclaimed. Aditi laughed lightly. "It's the saree. And good lighting." The woman beamed anyway.

Yet, beneath that serene smile, Aditi noticed every nuance.

Kabir's laughter was easy — just not with her. He turned toward relatives, toward friends, toward WAC colleagues — but rarely toward the woman standing inches away. When he did, the glance was brief, functional, acknowledging her presence the way one acknowledges a co-host. Not dismissive. Not unkind. Simply... professional.

It should have been reassuring. At least there was no rudeness. Instead, the civility hurt in ways anger never could. Because she was the only one who knew what had gone quiet inside him.

The WAC arrival changed the texture of the evening.

Pilots carry themselves differently, even in suits. They moved with casual confidence, scanning rooms instinctively, backs straight, faces relaxed in a way that came from trust — trust in training, trust in one another, trust in the fact that hierarchy is both boundary and safety.

Men and women approached in pairs, in groups, with greetings that straddled professionalism and camaraderie.

"Congratulations," one Air Commodore said, grasping Kabir's shoulder firmly.

"Thank you, sir," Kabir replied, posture subtly shifting into respect. "We're glad you could come."

"This is your wife?" the man asked, turning to Aditi with a kindness that came from habit — the military way of acknowledging the families who carried unseen weight.

Aditi smiled. “Yes. It’s lovely to meet you.”

He nodded warmly. “Welcome to the madness.”

She laughed. “I’ve heard stories.”

The women from the force — some married to officers, some officers themselves — came with an ease Aditi admired instantly. They asked gentle questions, shared quick snippets about base life, described which postings had the best canteens, compared mess cooks like food critics.

One of them squeezed her hand after a joke. “If you ever need anything — someone to complain about schedules to — we’re your people.”

Aditi felt, for the first time that night, a small wave of comfort. That invisible network of women who had learned resilience not from romance but from logistics, from waiting rooms, from half-packed suitcases.

Kabir watched the interaction from a distance. He liked how easily she blended — not performatively, not in a rush to impress. She listened. She responded thoughtfully. She wasn’t intimidated.

Pride flickered inside him — quickly, then gone. Because the next emotion that followed was fear. *What if she grows deeper into this life while still tethered to a man she once loved more intensely?* What if, years later, this night became the memory he revisited as the beginning of a choice he should have demanded earlier?

He closed the thought. Smiled at another guest.

The music shifted at some point — sliding from background ambience into a pulse that summoned bodies to the floor. A DJ adjusted volume, cousins who had waited all evening sprang up, and someone shouted the universal wedding incantation: “Dance floor!”

Kabir was caught before he could refuse.

His friends encircled him — laughter loud, affection louder. One of them grabbed his wrist, another clapped him on the back, and within seconds, the Squadron Leader was on the dance floor surrounded by men who had flown alongside him through actual danger and now insisted on dragging him through synchronized nonsense.

He resisted only for show. Then he let go — not wildly, not foolishly, but with enough abandon that the crowd cheered. He had rhythm, surprisingly. The

suit didn't hinder him — it enhanced everything, making him look like those rare men who could command both boardrooms and wedding stages effortlessly. His hair remained immaculately in place. His smile widened.

He laughed freely — head thrown back for a second, eyes closing briefly as the beat carried him. Someone filmed it. Someone else cheered, “Kabir! Kabir!” Liquor had flowed freely and it showed.

From the edge of the floor, Aditi watched. And no one would have guessed — not the cheering cousins, not the clapping uncles, not the amused WAC officers — that the only person he had not once looked toward while dancing was the woman whose name had been attached to his a day earlier.

The music called to her too. A few cousins tugged at her hand, encouraging. “Come! Bhabhi, come!” She shook her head gently, laughing. “Later.”

Later didn't come.

Kabir danced with his friends. Twirled one senior officer's teenage daughter playfully. Let his cousin drag him into a coordinated family sequence. He hugged someone he hadn't seen in years. He even pulled his father onto the floor for a brief, joyful moment.

He did not ask Aditi once.

Standing there, she understood something crucial: It wasn't that he didn't want to be near her. It was that being near her still hurt too much to risk under bright lights and loud music.

He disappeared again after the song ended.

There is a particular magic to receptions: the way the groom and bride can technically be the center yet vanish simultaneously.

Kabir mastered that invisibility with disconcerting ease.

One moment, he was at her side, shaking hands with some visiting uncle from Chandigarh. The next, he had crossed half the hall, speaking with the caterer, then the photographer, then an officer from a neighboring command.

He moved with intention — scanning details, checking arrangements, thanking staff, solving small issues before they grew. Host mode, not avoidance — but avoidance disguised beautifully inside responsibility.

Whenever Aditi glanced around, he was in motion. Carrying chairs for elderly relatives. Coordinating with someone about the generator backup. Laughing with kids. Guiding the DJ to lower the volume during a speech. Standing with her father for five minutes, listening to him talk about music and nodding sincerely.

He was gracious with her family – strikingly so. He spoke to her mother with warmth, complimenting her saree, asking about her joint pain because he remembered. He offered water, chairs, comfort. He took pictures with her cousins. He asked her younger brother about college plans and listened, genuinely.

Aditi watched all of this and felt both grateful and pierced. Because he was being the perfect son-in-law. And yet she might as well have been another guest.

Their interactions were limited to necessity: “Stand here.” “Smile.” “Ready?” “Thank you.”

Each phrase was gentle, respectful, wrapped in civility. Not once did he touch her without reason. Not once did he lean in to whisper something just for her. Not once did he allow his gaze to linger longer than etiquette demanded.

He had not built a wall between them. He had simply moved far enough away inside himself that walls were unnecessary.

If receptions are theater, photographers are their directors.

“Closer,” one instructed, waving impatiently. “Just a little. Yes – perfect.”

Kabir stepped nearer automatically. Their shoulders brushed. For a fraction of a second contact burned like memory. Aditi inhaled sharply. He didn’t pull away. He didn’t lean in either. He hovered in that neutral distance – near enough for the picture, far enough to protect whatever boundaries he had erected in the space of a day.

“Smile,” the photographer insisted.

They did. The camera captured beauty, formality, symmetry – and none of the fault lines.

Years later, no one looking at those pictures would see the ache. They would see a very handsome groom in a suit cut like a promise. A luminous bride glowing in gold. The illusion almost perfect: Two people beginning a forever.

Only the two of them would know that forever – at least tonight – felt like something they were holding cautiously, not embracing fully.

As the hours stretched, Aditi learned to move through the reception like someone navigating unfamiliar terrain with grace. She circulated. She chatted. She thanked. She answered variations of the same questions repeatedly – about the wedding, about the honeymoon (she smiled and said, “Soon”), about how she liked her new home (“Everyone’s been wonderful”).

Inside, thoughts looped quietly. She noticed how her heart lifted whenever Kabir appeared nearby – only to sink again when he drifted away. She wondered if anyone else sensed the space between them. Likely not. He was too skilled at public warmth. She was too skilled at self-containment.

She stood at the drinks table for a while, sipping water, watching him from across the hall as he bent to hear a junior officer better over the noise. His hand rested lightly on the younger man’s shoulder – reassuring, supportive. He was kindness personified – to the world.

And yet, beneath that kindness, there existed a grief only she had earned. She caught his eye briefly. For one fleeting second, something flickered – softness, concern, an feeling not yet articulated. Then someone called his name, and the flicker vanished like breath on glass.

The line of vermillion remained – vivid, unashamed. Women noticed. They complimented the neatness of the line, asked about the shade, some teasing her about how carefully Kabir must have applied it. She smiled and deflected.

But she felt his gaze, occasionally, when he thought she wasn’t looking – drawn not to her face, not to her jewelry, but to that streak of red. Not with ownership. With confusion. Pain. Something like betrayal struggling against hope.

She touched it once absentmindedly during a lull, fingers hovering over the mark as if to reassure both herself and the universe. *This is not performance*, she thought quietly. *This is promise – even if I am still learning how to live it.*

After hours of congratulations and laughter and plates refilled too many times, the crowd thinned. Chairs scraped. Children yawned dramatically. Photographers began packing lenses. The smell of wilting flowers replaced fresh fragrance.

A final cluster of WAC officers shook hands and departed with dignified goodbyes. “See you on base,” one of them said. “Soon,” Kabir replied.

When the hall finally emptied, silence didn’t descend – it exhaled.

Only family remained, gathering leftover sweets and half-used decorations, discussing transport, joking about exhaustion. The staff dismantled quietly, efficient in their familiarity with celebrations that had already begun fading into memory before they were finished.

Kabir helped stack chairs. He was still in motion, still absorbing tasks, refusing stillness. Stillness would mean thoughts, and thoughts meant reliving a name spoken in darkness that had not been his.

Aditi sat for a moment at the edge of the stage, letting the silence wrap slowly around her bones. Her feet ached. Her shoulders throbbed from posture and performance. Yet the deeper exhaustion came from the emotional balancing act – honoring everyone’s happiness while mourning something unnamed.

He called out gently, “Ready?” She nodded and rose.

They walked out side by side into the night. The air outside was sharp, carrying traces of winter and leftover perfume. The hall behind them glowed faintly, like a memory already sealing itself shut.

The car ride was quiet. City lights slipped past in obedient lines. Horns sounded distantly, as if underwater. She leaned her head slightly against the window, the cool glass anchoring her. He drove with the same focused calm he applied to everything critical – measured, neither rushed nor lingering.

Her mind replayed snapshots: His laughter on the dance floor. His professional warmth with her father. The way he had looked at her indoors once, briefly, as though it had betrayed him.

She almost spoke. Almost reached across the silence, risked opening another raw conversation when both of them were too tired to survive it well.

But fatigue won. They reached home.

The house was quiet – relatives had already returned to their rooms, dishes had been washed, lights dimmed.

Inside the bedroom, Kabir unbuttoned his suit jacket with mechanical exhaustion. He set it carefully on a hanger – not because he cared tonight

about creases, but because order brought a semblance of peace. He loosened his tie, sighed once — a low, private sound.

She watched him. 'You should sleep,' she said softly.

He nodded. "I think I will." No pretense. No apology. Just truth.

He slipped beneath the sheets, turned onto his side, and within minutes his breathing evened. It wasn't deep rest — more like a body surrendering when the mind was too drained to resist.

She lay there awake. Stared at the ceiling. Listened to the night pressing gently against the windows. The fatigue in her limbs was heavy, but her mind refused the off switch.

She replayed moments like beads on a string: each glance, each non-touch, each polite exchange that should have meant normalcy and instead marked distance. She wondered whether this would become their pattern — a marriage built on courtesy instead of connection.

Then she told herself: *He needs time — not distance.*

Time. It was both promise and threat. Time could heal. Time could also teach people how to live without what they once longed for.

She closed her eyes. Sleep came in fragments.

The morning unfolded with domestic ordinariness that felt almost cruel.

Sunlight, filtered through curtains, softened everything. Breakfast smells drifted — toast, tea, faint spices. Somewhere, laughter rose — the relaxed laughter that comes only after a major event has concluded successfully.

Presents awaited. They sat on the living room floor with families around them, opening gift after gift — crystal bowls, dinner sets, envelopes with careful handwriting, pressure cookers, shawls folded into perfect squares.

Everyone commented. Everyone teased. Everyone told stories of gifts they had received at their own weddings.

Kabir participated. He smiled at a particularly odd vase, made a dry joke that had the room laughing. He thanked each person who had come to drop off something personally. He took responsibility for writing down which gift came from whom.

Functionally, he was flawless. Emotionally, he remained gently elsewhere.

He did not avoid Aditi. He simply didn't notice her first anymore. She felt it — that subtle shift from *you are my priority* to *you exist alongside many priorities*. It was reasonable, logical, even mature.

It also scared her. Because marriages do not fracture dramatically. They erode — inch by inch, replaced by habits that look benign.

After lunch, while she stacked empty boxes neatly, she heard his voice from the hallway. Calm. Measured. Speaking to his parents. "There's something I need to tell you."

She froze.

His parents looked up, alert.

"There's been an emergency at work," he said — tone respectful, but firm in a way that suggested non-negotiable reality. "I've been asked to report back to WAC. I'll have to rejoin tomorrow."

Tomorrow.

The word fell into the room like a dropped utensil. His mother blinked. "Tomorrow? Kabir — but the leave..."

He nodded. "Cancelled."

His father frowned, logic already assembling itself. "Is it serious?"

Kabir offered a practiced half-truth. "Nothing alarming. Just operational. They need me."

Pride flickered behind their concern — that quiet, complicated pride of parents whose son carried responsibilities woven with invisible threads of national importance. Worry came second. Protest barely arrived.

"Of course," his father said, after a beat. "Duty first."

His mother sighed — not disappointed with him, but with timing itself. "At least eat properly before you go. You'll stay here only, no?"

Aditi stood in the doorway, unnoticed for a moment. The word *tomorrow* echoed in her.

She knew enough now not to accuse, not to plead. She also knew what this meant emotionally: the conversation between them – the real one – had just been postponed indefinitely.

He glanced over then and noticed her.

Their eyes met. He held her gaze for the first time that day – really held it.

In his expression there was apology, resolve, and something like quiet resignation. Not triumph. Not escape. Just necessity – chosen, perhaps, because personal vulnerability still felt too dangerous.

He did not say *I'm sorry*. He didn't need to. The room was full of ears. Instead, he said gently, "We'll talk tonight."

She nodded. Because what else was there to do?

The house adjusted around the new information quickly – His packing discussed, staying arrangements checked, relatives sighing over how demanding military life always was. Life pivoted without ceremony.

And Aditi understood something with startling clarity: Marriages in uniform were not just about loving a person. They were about learning to share that person with an institution that never apologized.

As the afternoon light mellowed and the house settled again, she folded the last empty gift wrap and placed it into a drawer. The line of sindoor burned vivid in the mirror when she passed.

She paused. Touched it lightly – not with certainty, not with regret, but with determination still searching for footing.

Down the hallway, Kabir's voice drifted faintly – discussing trains, timetables, return dates for his relatives.

And she wondered – not for the first time, not for the last – whether love that began with hesitation could still grow into something unbreakable. Whether time, the very thing that had broken so much in her past, might finally prove itself capable of stitching.

The house hummed softly. Outside, the winter afternoon faded gently toward another evening. And somewhere between obligation and hope, between distance and longing, their marriage stood – not collapsing, not flourishing, simply waiting.

Chapter 17

Kabir reported back to Western Air Command the morning after the reception.

The hall still lingered in his senses when he woke — roses, incense, perfume, talcum powder, the faint echo of music. Laughter. Camera flashes. Aunts leaning forward with blessing hands. Friends clapping him on the shoulder. Through all of it he had kept moving — smiling, greeting, adjusting, as though motion itself could protect him from the complicated stillness that waited just beyond the edge of celebration.

Now, the world had already pulled away from the wedding and pressed itself back into its usual shape.

Western Air Command looked exactly the way it always did — solid, institutional, unchanged. The corridors hummed with the low persistence of fluorescent lights. A draft whispered along the floor. Clerks moved with stacks of paper. Voices carried in short, functional bursts. The outside winter sun lay pale and exhausted over Delhi, as if it had climbed halfway up the sky and lost interest.

Kabir walked in with his file tucked under his arm, precise as ever. He saluted seniors. He returned the enthusiastic congratulations of juniors. An older officer clasped his shoulder and said something about marriage bringing order to life. Someone else joked about learning to compromise, and another about sharing cupboard space.

He handled it with his usual mild humour. He had practice in this — the polite choreography required to maintain relationships without ever truly exposing vulnerability.

But when he entered his office and sat at his desk, an odd calmness washed over him.

There were reports to read. Readiness assessments. Squadron deployment summaries. Weather analysis sheets. Fuel tables. It was familiar terrain, and familiarity, even when tedious, could be a balm.

He worked. He underlined paragraphs. Made notes. Drafted responses. Signed where his signature was required.

He did not think about the reception stage. He did not think about Aditi's eyes searching his face while relatives surrounded them. He did not think about the unsettled place inside him that had not yet learned to believe fully in what they had agreed to build.

Instead, he fell back on discipline. It had always worked before.

He stayed late that night.

He stayed late the night after that.

He stayed late because staying late meant not deciding where else to be.

He could go to his parents' house, where Aditi was staying temporarily — the respectable transitional space between rituals and actual relocation — but the idea tightened something in his chest. Not because he didn't want to see her. He did. He missed her already, absurdly, despite the fact that they had barely had time to even create a new rhythm together.

But now that she wore the small gold chain that marked his presence in her life, now that entire families had said yes, now that the last words of blessings still hovered invisible over them — the ghost of another man sat larger in his imagination than it had before.

He hated himself for it. He hated the quiet jealousy that arrived uninvited, the sense that love required winning a competition he had never asked to compete in. He hated how that thought co-existed with his tenderness for her. And perhaps — if he was honest in the privacy of his own mind — he hated that there were parts of her life where he still felt like a visitor.

In the mess, none of that existed. In the mess, there were polished floors, clinking plates, routine dinners, the faint echo of the TV in the corner, laughter that came and went without asking questions. In the mess, his bed was his own. His cupboard was his own. His quiet was his own.

He told himself he was simply giving both of them time. He didn't call. He didn't go. He sent short texts when politeness demanded it.

And every night, lying on his mess bed staring at the ceiling fan, he wondered if withdrawal could masquerade as restraint, if distance could pretend to be dignity.

The news came almost without ceremony.

A mid-week afternoon, a call from the posting cell, the crisp tone of someone whose life revolved around files and orders and ensuring movement in the right direction.

He listened. He asked a question or two. He thanked the officer. Then he sat back in his chair.

His tenure at WAC was nearing its end. The decision had been taken. Headquarters had reviewed his records, assessed his flying hours, and determined what came next.

He was being posted back to Sirsa. Back to the No 15 squadron. Back to operational flying – specifically, to regain currency after nearly three years of staff duties that had kept him largely grounded.

The reasons were printed cleanly in the document that arrived on his desk a few hours later:

Operational necessity. Re-currency requirements. Integration with squadron mission profiles. Further review after completion.

He stared at the lines, and a familiar spark – something like relief, something like hunger – woke inside him. He had missed flying.

Not in the romanticised way civilians imagined pilots missed flying – not the thrill or the glamour or the heroism – but the totality of attention, the narrowing of the world to cockpit, instruments, sky, instinct. The way responsibility sharpened his mind and emptied it at the same time. The quiet confidence in the ritual of preparation, brief, sortie, debrief.

He had missed belonging to something that felt like purpose. But now purpose came hand-in-hand with distance.

He tapped the file gently, once. Sirsa. A few weeks. He pictured Aditi. He pictured telling her parents. He pictured his own parents. He pictured silence blooming in conversations that had once felt easier.

He rubbed his temples and exhaled slowly. Duty didn't consult personal calendars. It never had.

The dinner was arranged by his mother, with a kind of brisk determination that made refusal impossible. "Everyone together," she said. "It will be nice. We should all sit. Talk. Make plans."

Aditi's parents arrived. .

Aditi was dressed simply – a muted kurta, hair loosely tied back. There were faint shadows under her eyes, and when she smiled, it looked like something held together by effort rather than instinct. She helped his mother in the kitchen, carrying bowls to the table, adjusting plates, making sure everyone had water.

Kabir arrived after them.

He touched her parents' feet. He greeted his parents with warmth and respect. His gaze brushed over Aditi for a moment – not lingering, but careful – as though he were afraid of revealing too much in front of an audience.

They began dinner with polite conversation. The wedding. The relatives. The gifts. A story about an uncle who had drunk too much at the reception and declared eternal love for the caterer's biryani.

It was only once the plates were half-emptied and the rhythm of eating had settled that Kabir spoke. "I received my posting orders today," he said.

He did not raise his voice. The words rested gently in the space between them, waiting.

His father looked up. "Oh?"

"Yes," Kabir said. "My stint at WAC is over. I've been posted to Sirsa. Back to the No 15 squadron."

There was a brief light in his father's eyes – pride, relief, something like both.

"Back to flying," his father said quietly.

“Back to flying,” Kabir confirmed. “I need to regain my operational currency. Three years here have been good for my career — but not for my cockpit hours. The Air Force wants that corrected.”

He kept it factual. He listed details without drama. “I’ll have to complete specific mission profiles. Integration training. Simulator hours. Evaluation sorties. It’s structured — nothing sudden, nothing reckless. But it will take time.”

Aditi’s mother nodded slowly, absorbing, as if translating military language into emotional meaning.

His mother smiled — the proud, worried smile of someone who had lived this life long enough to know both sides of it.

“It suits you more,” she said softly. “Being grounded always felt temporary on you.”

Aditi said nothing. Her hand had stilled on the tablecloth. The colour had drained slightly from her cheeks, as though the edges of reality had shifted unexpectedly.

Kabir hesitated, then continued. “There’s one more thing. I won’t be taking family accommodation immediately. Quarters aren’t guaranteed right away — and even if they were, my schedule will be unpredictable. Exercises. Detachments. Long days. It doesn’t make sense to uproot Aditi right now only for her to be alone in a new place most of the time.”

His mother frowned, concern surfacing fast. “So she’ll stay here?”

“For the moment,” Kabir said. “With you. With her parents when she wishes. Or at the flat if she prefers independence. We’ll reassess once my posting stabilizes.”

Aditi’s father leaned forward, gently. “And how long might that take?”

Kabir shrugged lightly. “There’s no fixed answer. Months. Maybe longer.”

The silence that followed was not heavy. It was stunned — like a room adjusting to a new temperature.

His mother sighed quietly. “Newly married couples should not be separated like this. We stayed in a mess when we married”

He could have said *the Air Force doesn't schedule around newlyweds*. He could have said *this is normal*. He could have said *thousands live like this*. Instead he said, simply, "I know."

He glanced at Aditi then. She was looking at him — not angrily, not accusingly — just intensely, as if memorising each sentence.

Dinner resumed. Someone said something about Sirsa's winter. His father reminisced about a posting decades ago. Conversation eased into safer grooves again.

But for Aditi the air felt thinner, as though someone had quietly opened a window in winter.

Later, the house was quiet. His parents had retired. Her parents had left, whispering softly about something domestic. Aditi sat on the bed in what used to be his childhood room, now temporarily hers — familiar furniture holding unfamiliar emotions.

Kabir stood by the window. Delhi's night spread outside in small, scattered lights. Neither of them spoke for a long time.

Finally, she said — not accusing, not pleading, just bewildered: "So you're going back to Sirsa."

"Yes."

"To fly again. Because you need to be current."

"Yes."

"You'll go alone. I'll stay here. And we don't know for how long."

He nodded. "Yes."

She repeated the sentences as if each one needed to be stitched into reality before the next could be believed. Her throat worked. "And you're... doing this? You're going?"

He turned from the window. "It isn't a decision, Aditi. It's an order. And it's the right professional move. If I delay re-currency now, I fall behind permanently. I lose edge. In our world, that's dangerous."

"I understand that," she whispered. "I do. I just — I didn't think it would start immediately. This part of the life. The... being separate."

He sat on the chair opposite the bed, elbows on knees, fingers loosely clasped. "I didn't plan for it either."

The words hung there, insufficient.

She swallowed again, and the emotion she had been holding since dinner finally cracked open. "Are you choosing distance from me?" she asked softly.

He drew in a slow breath — not surprised, perhaps, only saddened.

"No."

"Because it feels like," she went on, voice beginning to tremble, "ever since we got married — properly married — you've been... elsewhere. You went back to work the next day. You stayed at the mess. You didn't come over unless my parents insisted. I kept telling myself you needed space, or you were tired, or it was just an adjustment. But now this—" She shook her head helplessly. "It feels like the world heard the wedding bells and immediately pushed you away."

He watched her quietly. When he finally spoke, his tone was even. "I'm not doing this to escape you."

Her voice cracked then, betraying the composure she had been holding on to. "I don't know how to believe that," she admitted. "Since we've met, Kabir, we've always had access to each other. Even when we disagreed. Even when we didn't fully trust yet. We were present. I could find you. I could talk. This—" she gestured helplessly toward some imaginary map — "this feels like the beginning of a long, long road where I have to learn to watch you leave."

He let her speak. He owed her that space. "I don't want you to feel abandoned," he said.

"But you are leaving."

"Yes."

"And I'm staying."

"For now," he replied, instinctively. "Not forever."

She gave a short, humourless laugh. "That's what distance always says."

The quiet thickened. He exhaled and leaned back, "I'm not doing this on purpose," he said, softly but firmly. "This is a direct order. If it were optional, I would have told you that." He hesitated, then added something he had kept

tucked away. "And since we've met," he said quietly, "I didn't know there was another man in your story. It'll take me time to face that."

She froze — not with guilt, but with an ache that came from hearing something that had always hovered unsaid.

He went on, measuring each word. "So maybe — just maybe — space isn't entirely an enemy. Maybe some distance... recalibrates things. Gives both of us room to breathe. To maybe choose each other without ghosts standing in the middle. Or not."

Her eyes filled before she could stop them. "Recalibrate," she whispered, stunned by the word. "Like I'm a system that needs correction."

"That's not what I meant," he said quickly, regret flashing.

Tears slipped down her cheeks anyway. "I don't want to learn how to miss you as my normal," she said, voice breaking. "I don't want our marriage to start with absence."

He moved then. Not dramatically — just enough to sit beside her on the bed, leaving a polite, aching inch of space between them. "I don't want absence either," he said softly. "But I also can't pretend my life before you doesn't exist. The Air Force isn't just a job. It has teeth. It pulls. And right now, it's pulling me back into the cockpit. If I fight it, I hurt us later — in ways you can't see yet."

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

He wanted to reach out and touch her hair, her shoulder — something — but instead he held his hands still, as though even comfort might be misunderstood.

They sat like that — side by side, separated by inches and by everything that could not be resolved in one night.

After a while, she said, in a voice that was both weary and fiercely tender, "Promise me you won't forget to talk."

He turned slightly. "What?"

"When you're there," she said. "Promise me you won't disappear into duty so deeply that you forget there's someone on the other side of it. Someone who's learning to be brave. Someone who didn't choose this life, but chose you."

The quiet after those words was almost reverent.

He nodded, slowly. "I'll try," he said honestly. "I can't promise schedules. I can't promise visits. But I can promise I won't... vanish."

She nodded back — not reassured, but at least anchored.

Outside, a stray dog barked. Somewhere, a train horn sounded faintly. The world continued its indifferent rotation.

They eventually lay down — not in the effortless tangle newlyweds in stories managed, but carefully, as though each were afraid to disrupt the fragile truce.

He stared at the ceiling, listening to her slow, uneven breaths.

She faced the wall, hands curled beneath her cheek, tears drying quietly in the dark.

Between them, distance had already begun to practice. And in the days ahead, it would learn to stretch itself further.

Chapter 18

Sirsa looked different from how Kabir remembered, and yet it hadn't changed at all.

Memory had given it a softening filter — old sunlight, gentle wind, the feeling of being younger. Reality stripped all that away. The airfield spread out vast and functional under the pale morning light. Concrete, hangars, the faint shimmer of heat rising off tarmac even in winter. The smell — avgas, oil, something metallic — slipped into his lungs like an old, familiar language.

It slipped into him now without ceremony. It watched him arrive the way one watches someone who had once belonged here and had tried, for a while, to belong somewhere else.

He stood for a moment with his duffel slung over his shoulder, breath visible in the cool air, watching a crew vehicle roll past, its tyres humming softly against the ground. Far down the apron, a Sukhoi stood parked at an angle, nose pointed slightly into the breeze that barely existed. It looked alert even at rest — not aggressive, just awake.

Something in his chest loosened. Not joy. Not nostalgia. Recognition. He was back inside a grammar his body understood.

“Squadron Leader.”

He turned at the voice. An engineer he remembered — older now, lines deeper around the eyes — smiled and shook his hand. There were other nods, brief greetings, the restrained warmth of people who had flown with him before and did not need to dramatise the reunion. No one asked how the years away had been. Sirsa was not interested in explanations. Only capability.

He reported. Signed the necessary documents. Received the posting brief: attachment to the Sukhoi-30MKI squadron, recurrency phase to be completed before operational clearance. Duration dependent on performance. Efficient. Precise. Impersonal.

Exactly what he needed.

A Flight Lieutenant escorted him to the squadron building — young, alert, enthusiasm still visible in his stride. “Good to have you back, sir,” the officer said. “I’ve heard you flew here before.”

Kabir smiled faintly. “Long enough ago that the aircraft have improved since.”

The building’s door opened with a soft hydraulic sound. The squadron room smelled of coffee and paper and something electric — the residue of minds constantly stretched just short of danger. The Squadron Commander greeted him with a firm handshake. “We’ll bring you back methodically,” he said. “No shortcuts. No sentiment.”

“Yes, sir.”

The first briefing was blunt. Currency tables. Updated procedures. Changes in tactics, software refinements, weapons integration notes. Kabir listened carefully, making notes, asking precise questions. He recognised most of it — but recognition wasn’t enough. Flying demanded accuracy, not memory. It felt like opening a book he had once memorized — only to discover that someone had added new chapters while he was away.

By the time the briefing ended, his head ached pleasantly. And quietly, the rhythm of being a pilot again began to take hold.

That night, alone in the sparse officers’ accommodation — white walls, narrow bed, a desk too small for anything personal — he lay awake longer than he expected. Not restless. Just aware. Aware that the ground beneath him finally made sense again.

The simulators came first. Dark rooms. Perfect replicas. Screens that brought terrain alive with unsettling realism. The cockpit wrapped around him in familiar intimacy — switches where his hands expected them to be, displays glowing softly.

"Not here to test ego," the instructor said. "We rebuild reflex. And familiarity. The systems have layers. You'll peel them back faster than most — but we peel anyway."

Kabir smiled faintly. "Understood."

The sessions were unforgiving. Emergencies layered atop each other. Failures designed to force choice, not comfort. He corrected himself once, twice — muscle memory reaching for an old configuration before stopping.

No embarrassment. Only recalibration.

Between runs came debriefs — precise, unsentimental.

"You hesitated here."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Cross-checking radar picture against AWACS cueing."

"Don't. Trust the cue. Verify later."

He absorbed it all.

By the third session, sweat soaked his undershirt despite the air-conditioning. His mind felt bruised but sharp — like a blade honed too quickly. He had forgotten this too — the physicality of attention. His body had rediscovered rhythm — how to breathe inside the cockpit, how to let instinct and training braid themselves together. He slept deeply that night.

For the first time since leaving WAC.

Flying again arrived quietly.

His name appeared on the sortie schedule without ceremony: dual sortie, supervised evaluation. He read it once. Nodded. Folded the paper.

Walking out to the aircraft felt strange — not emotional, not reverent. Just right. The Sukhoi-30MKI stood there like something coiled, restrained only by the idea of stillness. Sunlight edged along its wings. A technician gave a brief nod and moved aside.

Kabir placed his palm against the fuselage for half a second. Not a ritual. An acknowledgement. He climbed in. Strapped down. Systems came alive beneath his hands. His breathing synched with the aircraft in that old, intimate way

pilots never tell civilians about because it sounds mystical when really, it is bodily – a learned understanding between human and machine.

The runway stretched ahead, long and exact, sky widening at its far edge. Clearance came through. Throttle advanced. Acceleration pressed him back – firm, familiar, grounding. The aircraft lifted smoothly, wheels leaving earth without drama.

Something inside him unlocked. Not happiness. Alignment.

The sortie was straightforward – nothing heroic. Navigation. Intercepts. A surprise manoeuvre inserted mid-flight. He handled it cleanly. Communication crisp, decisions steady. On landing, he realised only afterward how deeply he had been breathing. He knew – not arrogantly, just honestly – that he had flown well.

The debrief was brief.

“Rust,” the supervising pilot said, “but controlled.”

Kabir nodded.

He walked out into the sunlight afterward, blinking. The world felt different at ground level now – slightly duller, but steadier, as if the flight had calibrated something internal that had been off-kilter since he’d left the skies.

He checked his phone out of habit. A message from Aditi: *Hope your first day went okay.*

He typed back: *Yes. Busy. Call Sunday.*

Then, as though remembering warmth as an afterthought, added: *Take care.*

He pocketed the phone. He did not immediately recognize that what felt adequate to him would feel like distance to someone waiting.

Sirsa settled into him. There were more simulator sessions. More sorties. Tactical briefings. Weather meetings. Maintenance delays that demanded improvisation. Quick lunches wolfed down between schedules. Evenings at the squadron room, comparing notes without drama, laughing quietly over old stories when time allowed.

He slept in temporary officers’ accommodation – sparse, functional, impersonal. White walls. A single chair. A small cupboard. The kind of place that asked nothing of him emotionally, which suited him well.

He called once a week. Sundays, mostly. The calls lasted between seven and twelve minutes – never more. He reported, in the way one reports facts: flying was going well, recurrency was on track, he was tired, he was fine. He didn't realize that restraint, to her, sometimes sounded like indifference.

They never fought. They never dug deeper. They were like two people walking beside a river, describing the water instead of saying what might drown them if they stepped inside.

Between calls, he sent messages – factual, clipped. *Landed. Simulator day. Long briefing.*

Sleep early.

None were unkind. None were enough. But he didn't see it. Not yet. Flying filled him. Duty steadied him. Fatigue numbed what had once been restless.

Aditi learned the evenings first.

Mornings were busy. Mornings had purpose – breakfast conversations with his mother, errands, grocery lists, occasional visits to her own parents' place. Mornings made her feel like she belonged to the world.

But evenings – evenings stretched. They began with light – golden, forgiving – but slowly the house slid into shadows, and time took on a quieter, echoing quality.

She discovered that loneliness wasn't loud. It made tea. It folded clothes. It sat beside you on a sofa and watched television without seeing it.

She started making routines without formally deciding to. A walk after dusk. Helping his mother water the plants. Organizing cupboards. Reading before bed – or at least turning pages.

She cooked sometimes – small dishes for herself in the flat when she stayed there, larger ones when she was with family. Cooking was manageable. Ingredients obeyed rules. Heat and salt behaved predictably. If something burned, there was an immediate cause.

Feelings didn't follow recipes. At night, she checked her phone. Sometimes there was a message. Often there wasn't.

Once, she typed a long paragraph – about silence, about missing conversation, about how absence had begun to feel like a presence. She deleted it. She did

not want to be heavy. She told herself stories instead. He is tired. He is working. This is normal.

Some nights, the stories worked. Other nights, the ceiling fan spun slowly overhead while she cried with quiet, controlled breaths — determined not to let the tears become performance, determined not to wake the household. She did not hate him for it. She hated the life, sometimes. Then felt guilty for hating the life that had made him.

Kabir, in Sirsa, found that flying rewired his emotional clocks.

There were days he woke thinking only in checklists. He would go through pre-flight briefings, the instructor's voice merging with tactical diagrams, threat envelopes, safety considerations. He would walk to the aircraft, run through switches with methodical calm. He would take off, and the world would condense into speed and altitude and radius of turn. He felt alive there, not because the danger thrilled him — but because clarity did.

In the air, there was always a right answer, even if it was difficult. Gravity, thrust, angle — these things did not lie. They did not grow insecure. They did not revisit old wounds in the middle of unrelated conversations. They did not ask for assurances he wasn't entirely sure he knew how to articulate.

After one particularly complex sortie — multiple intercept simulations, coordination across elements, a mock refueling profile — he walked back to the squadron room flushed with quiet satisfaction.

"Feels like you never left."

In the evening, he picked up his phone automatically — the way one checks weather — and sent a text. *All okay. Busy day. Will rest.*

.

She read it while drinking tea she had made too sweet because she had been thinking instead of measuring. She typed back: *Good. Rest.* She stared at the screen. It did not light up again. She placed the phone face-down. And the tea cooled.

Their calls remained polite. Measured.

Once, unexpectedly, she said, "Kabir... can we restart? Small things. Walks. Tea. Just us."

He closed his eyes. "I can't," he said quietly.

The word landed without sound. "Why?"

"Because I don't know whose absence I'm filling when I try."

Silence. The conversation moved on. Something delicate broke — not loudly, but definitively.

Eight months in, his recurrency neared completion. Evaluations passed. Profiles flown. The notation in his file shifted: operationally current. Kabir felt it settle into him — not as pride, but as relief. He was not behind. He was not, as some had feared quietly, a staff officer pretending to be a pilot again.

The Squadron Commander informed him without flourish. "Well done. You're cleared." Relief settled into Kabir — heavy, grounding. He belonged again.

That evening, a signal came through. Posting orders. Return to his old squadron. The Arrows. He read it twice. Then once more.

The past, waiting. He stood by the window, looking at the darkening sky over Sirsa, and for the first time in weeks, reached for his phone without checking the time.

Aditi answered on the second ring.

"I'm operational," he said.

There was a pause — then warmth flooded her voice. "That's... wonderful."

"And I've got orders," he added. "I'm going back. To the Arrows."

Another pause. Longer this time. "Okay," she said softly. "When?"

"Soon."

She smiled — he could hear it.

For the first time in months, neither of them rushed to end the call.

Outside, somewhere beyond the base perimeter, an aircraft roared — distant, unseen, moving toward another horizon. Kabir listened. Then closed his eyes.

For the first time, the sky did not feel like it was taking something from him. It felt like it was giving him back — to the ground, to duty, and perhaps, slowly, to her.

Chapter 19

The first thing Kabir noticed is how easily his body remembers.

The Arrows' dispersal area was unchanged—same hangars, same stretch of tarmac bleached by years of sun, same faint smell of fuel and hot metal that clings to the air long after engines shut down. There were new faces, of course, younger pilots whose eyes tracked him with a mixture of curiosity and respect, but the bones of the place remained familiar.

He had been back on strength for a few weeks now, running currency sorties, re-learning not the aircraft but the *rhythm* of flying with the squadron again. He climbed the ladder with a deliberate economy of movement. No wasted energy. No visible nerves. The ground crew moved around him with practiced ease—thumbs up, clipped phrases, a hand touching the jet as he settled into the cockpit.

The canopy came down. The world narrowed.

That moment had always felt sacred to him. Not dramatic, not emotional—just clean. A sealing-off of everything extraneous. Once the checks began, there was no room for memory or doubt. Only sequence.

Only response. Battery on. Systems alive.

The aircraft answered him immediately, with the familiarity of a language he had never forgotten. The years at WAC in Delhi—desk-bound, procedural, distant from flight—had not dulled the dialogue between man and machine.

As they taxied out, Kabir registered the Arrows forming up around him. Tight spacing. Clean alignment. This was not the forgiving sprawl of larger

formations. Every pilot here flew with the understanding that precision was not a preference but a requirement.

Clearance came. Throttle forward.

Acceleration pressed him into the seat, clean and unapologetic. The aircraft surged, eager, responsive, and when the wheels left the ground, something inside him finally uncoiled. The climb was aggressive, the sky opening up rapidly as the ground flattened into abstraction. His breathing evened out—not slower, not deeper, just correct.

Formation flying demanded a peculiar kind of awareness. You did not fly your aircraft alone; you flew the space between aircraft. Micro-adjustments. Constant anticipation. No indulgence in distraction.

Kabir slotted in without correction. No calls from lead. No reminders. The Arrows took him back without question.

The manoeuvres followed in rapid succession—turns that demanded commitment, transitions that punished hesitation. He felt the G-forces build and recede, welcomed the physical strain as something grounding. His vision tightened briefly at the edges, then cleared.

Somewhere during the second engagement profile, he realised that the months away had finally loosened their grip. The reviews, the policy drafts, the strange dislocation of wearing wings without flying—all of it lost relevance at altitude.

This was not nostalgia. This was continuity.

When they broke formation and headed back, the adrenaline did not dissipate immediately. It stayed with him, humming beneath the skin, a current not yet grounded. The landing was clean. Textbook. As he taxied in, he caught a glimpse of a younger pilot grinning openly in his direction.

Back at dispersal, helmets came off. Someone clapped him on the shoulder. "Welcome back, sir."

Kabir nodded. Praise had never made him uncomfortable, but it had never lingered either. What stayed was the internal calibration—the quiet certainty that he was still exactly where he belonged.

Only later, after debrief, when the adrenaline had softened into restlessness, did he sit alone and check his phone. There were no missed calls.

He unlocked it anyway. *Back with the Arrows. First sortie done.* He read the sentence once before sending it. It felt complete. Anything more would have diluted it.

The hours after flying had always unsettled him more than the flight itself.

During the sortie, there had been no room for excess thought. Afterward, when the body still carried energy but the mind had no immediate task, old instincts surfaced. He showered, changed, moved through the squadron building on autopilot, but something restless followed him.

His phone rang. Aditi.

"You flew," she said.

"Yes."

"How was it?"

He leaned back against the corridor wall and closed his eyes briefly. The adrenaline still pulsed faintly behind them.

"Like I remembered," he said. Then, after a pause, "Better."

He heard her exhale softly. "I was waiting to hear that."

They spoke briefly about the sortie—what he could say, what he chose to say. He kept it factual, grounded. She listened the way she always had, attentive without prying. Then he told her. "I got the quarters today."

There was a pause—not silence, exactly, but a shift. "Today?" she asked.

"The paperwork cleared this morning. They wanted me physically back with the squadron."

"And you went?" she asked.

"Yes."

He walked without thinking, heading toward the parking lot. The sun was lower now, shadows stretching across the ground. "It's empty," he said. "Completely."

She waited.

"White walls. Old fans. No furniture. The kind of quiet that carries sound longer than it should."

"What did it feel like?" she asked gently.

He unlocked his car and stood there, considering. "Like a place that hasn't decided who it belongs to yet," he said finally. "Like it's waiting." He did not tell her how long he had stood inside. How he had moved from room to room with deliberate slowness. The living room first—windows on two sides. The kitchen compact, functional, faintly antiseptic. The bedroom larger than expected, bare except for a dangling bulb.

The bedroom had unsettled him the most. "There's a balcony," he added. "Overlooks the older part of the station."

"That sounds like you," she said.

He almost smiled. "I'll move in this weekend," he said. "Gradually."

They spoke a little longer, then ended the call. He messaged her a few minutes later. *Type IV. No frills. If we don't take it now, there won't be another for a long time,* he added. *You don't have to come if you don't want to. I know it's not easy. And I won't always be around.*

I want to come, she typed back. And then, after a pause: *I know you'll be busy. Does Friday work? We can get some stuff on the weekend.*

He texted back. *Friday works. See you then.*

When he returned to the quarters that evening, the building already looked different—less abstract, more implicated. The light flickered before steadying. The emptiness felt sharper at night, more aware of itself. He set his helmet bag down near the entrance; the sound echoed briefly, altered by bare walls.

This place would require intention, he realised. Not decoration—he had never cared for that—but presence. Without it, the rooms felt capable of remaining untouched indefinitely.

He stepped onto the balcony. The air had cooled. Somewhere nearby, voices carried faintly, metal clinked against metal—routine continuing elsewhere.

This was not loneliness, he told himself. It was transition.

Still, there was a weight in his chest. Marriage had been abstract until now, barely discussed since that first night. Standing here, alone in an unfurnished space, it became tangible.

He placed his phone face-down on the railing. He did not need to check it. She had said she'd come. And right at that moment the quarters meant just one thing to him—Aditi.

In Delhi, Aditi was tired in a way that had nothing to do with work. The meeting had gone well enough, but her mind kept returning to Kabir's description of the quarters. Empty. Waiting.

She was replaying the phrase when she heard her name spoken behind her. Not loudly. Not tentatively. She turned.

Angad stood a few feet away, hands relaxed at his sides. He looked older—undeniably—but in a way that suited him. There was a steadiness to him now, a confidence that no longer announced itself. His hair had begun to silver at the temples, his face leaner, sharper.

She remained where she was, rooted to the spot. Running now would be childish.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

Neither of them moved.

"Angad," she said. Her voice, to her surprise, did not shake. "It's been a long time."

"It has." His eyes searched her face openly, almost hungrily, as if cataloguing every change, every continuity. He looked for something—perhaps the girl he had once known, perhaps reassurance that she had survived him "You look..." He paused, then smiled faintly. "You look really good. Black really suits you"

She almost smiled at that. Almost. "So do you," she said honestly. "Success and work seems to suit you," she said instead, gesturing vaguely toward him—the suit, the ease, the invisible aura of achievement that clung to him.

For the first time, something flickered across his expression—weariness, sharp and unguarded. "The work," he repeated softly, glancing away. "Right. Yes. It keeps me busy. Too busy, usually."

There was so much in that pause. Too many unsaid sentences hanging between them. She nodded, because nodding was safe.

Around them, the city surged on—sounds of the traffic, pedestrians talking, a loud horn blew somewhere. Life continued, indifferent to the small, private earthquake unfolding in its midst.

They began walking without discussing it, their steps aligning instinctively. Conversation stayed light at first—work, people they no longer really knew, the city shifting around them.

"I heard you got married," he said eventually.

"Yes."

He nodded. "I thought so." There was no accusation in his tone. Only acknowledgement. They stopped at a crossing.

"I'm not doing very well at marriage," he said. "I am married. It's just... failing."

She did not ask for details.

"I never quite closed the door," he continued. "On us."

The words were controlled. That unsettled her more than emotion would have. "This isn't appropriate," she said after a moment.

"I know," he replied immediately. "I'm not asking you for anything. I just needed to say it."

They crossed when the light changed. What stirred in her was not longing, not desire, but recognition. Angad's place in her life had not been erased—only archived.

At the corner where they parted, he asked, "Coffee?"

She hesitated. Long enough to notice the hesitation. "Yes," she said. "Coffee is fine."

They exchanged numbers, though neither needed to. She watched him walk to his expensive car. He had everything he had once chased. And yet, as he walked to the car, he looked like a man who had forgotten how to breathe.

Aditi turned away at last, blending back into the crowd, her heart oddly calm now, as though it had been waiting years for this single, devastating confirmation.

Later that night, her phone lit up. *It was good seeing you.*

She typed, deleted, then typed again. *It was.*

She set the phone down and stared at the ceiling. There was no guilt yet. No panic. Only a quiet, unsettling sense of overlap. Some things, she realized, did not fade. They simply learned how to hide.

In Sirsa, Kabir sat alone in an unfurnished quarter, the adrenaline of flight long gone, the echo of his footsteps already fading.

Neither of them yet understood how narrow the space between certainty and complication truly was. But the night held it all—without judgement, without urgency—patient as ever.

Chapter 20

Kabir had underestimated how quickly an empty house could begin to feel expectant.

The quarters had not resisted him when he moved in. They had accepted his presence without comment, without warmth, without judgement. The building itself was older than most of the newer constructions on base—solid, slightly worn, designed in an era where function preceded comfort. Its stairwells carried sound far too easily, footsteps echoing with faint insistence, as though the structure itself had learned to listen.

He had brought very little with him.

Two uniform bags. One civilian suitcase. A helmet bag he placed automatically near the door before realising he no longer needed it there. Someone from the squadron had pressed a kettle into his hands with the air of someone solving a problem before it was voiced.

“You’ll need this,” the officer had said.

Kabir had accepted it without protest.

The first night, he slept on the temporary cot provided by stores. It was narrow and functional, the mattress thin enough to register the firmness beneath it. He folded it away the next morning with unconscious precision, smoothing the cover even though there was no one there to see it. Habit had outlived context.

By the third evening, the house had begun to feel different.

Not warmer—he would not have called it that—but aware. As though the rooms had noticed his routines and adjusted their silence accordingly. The living room no longer felt like a corridor between door and balcony. The kitchen no longer smelled only of disinfectant and age. Even the bedroom, with its bare walls and dangling bulb, had begun to feel less exposed.

Still, it unsettled him. He spent most evenings standing rather than sitting, moving slowly from room to room, stopping at thresholds longer than necessary. He was not inspecting, exactly. There was nothing to assess. The structure was sound. The fittings adequate. The space generous enough for two people without being indulgent.

What he was doing—though he would not have named it so easily—was waiting. He found himself thinking about Aditi with an attention that surprised him. Not in dramatic gestures or imagined conversations, but in specifics so domestic they bordered on trivial. The way she would walk into the living room and immediately notice the light. The way she would frown slightly at the colour of the walls, then soften when she realised they could be changed—or at least negotiated with.

She would hate the ceiling fans, he was certain. Too loud. Too inelegant. She would tolerate them at first, then replace them quietly, without ceremony, once she had lived with them long enough to justify the change to herself.

Pastels, he thought. It had surprised him, early in their relationship, how much attention she paid to colour. Not bold, declarative hues, but muted ones—powders and washes and tones that seemed almost apologetic until they were layered just right. He remembered her Delhi flat well enough to see it now without effort: pale blue cushions, soft throws, light filtering through curtains rather than being blocked by them.

She believed, he had learned, that spaces should not announce themselves too loudly.

The living room would not survive her unchanged.

He could imagine her rearranging it within days of arrival—not obsessively, not with urgency, but with a quiet decisiveness that left no doubt. The couch angled slightly away from the television. A rug that softened footsteps. Lamps replacing the single harsh overhead light. He smiled faintly at the thought.

The bedroom remained more difficult. He stood there one evening, hands braced on his hips, surveying the space as if it were an unfamiliar problem set. The walls were too bare. The floor echoed. The room felt large in a way that suggested exposure rather than generosity.

She would soften it, he knew. Not with extravagance. With texture. Lamps instead of the unforgiving ceiling bulb. Bedsheets she would insist on choosing herself. Cushions arranged and rearranged until they felt right.

He did not buy anything. That decision had been instinctive. He knew better than to impose choices on a space that would not remain his alone. He had learned, long ago, that her desire to decide was not control but care. A way of making a place safe by understanding it.

At night, when he lay on the cot, sleep came reluctantly. His mind did not race. There were no catastrophic thoughts, no spirals of doubt. What unsettled him was the suspension itself—the sense that something essential was on pause, that momentum had been delayed rather than lost.

He did not worry that she would not come. What he wondered—quietly, persistently—was whether she would like it. Whether the quarters would feel too austere. Too exposed. Whether Sirsa's air would feel harsher than Delhi's, the light too unforgiving. Whether she would miss her familiar routines, her neighbourhood, the easy anonymity of the city.

He imagined her walking through the rooms, cataloguing adjustments in her head. He imagined her standing on the balcony, testing the view, assessing the silence.

He told himself that this was anticipation, not anxiety. Still, he checked his phone more often than he needed to.

In Delhi, Aditi woke the next morning with a sense of displacement that had nothing to do with geography.

She lay still for a moment, staring at the ceiling, letting the previous day rearrange itself in her mind. Kabir's voice on the phone. The way he had described the quarters. Empty. Waiting. Angad's face, older but disturbingly familiar.

Her phone lay on the bedside table, screen dark. When she unlocked it, a message waited. *Coffee later?*—Angad

She did not respond immediately. Instead, she got out of bed, moved through her morning routines with deliberate slowness, as if stretching time would clarify something. She made tea. She stood at the window longer than usual. She dressed carefully, without knowing for whom.

The message remained unanswered. She told herself she was not avoiding it. She simply had not decided yet.

When she finally typed back—*Okay. After lunch.*—the response came almost immediately. *Perfect. You always liked afternoons better.* The familiarity unsettled her more than it should have.

They met mid-afternoon, in a part of the city that had resisted reinvention. The café Angad chose was loud enough to prevent intimacy but quiet enough to sustain conversation. It was the kind of place where people lingered without committing, where conversations overlapped and privacy was negotiated rather than granted.

He arrived late. “Traffic,” he said, leaning in briefly, as if explanation were equivalent to apology.

She adjusted instinctively—shifted her bag, made space for him at the table. The reflex surprised her even as it happened.

They talked easily at first. Not about the past. Not directly. They circled it instead—work frustrations, shared irritations, people they both found faintly ridiculous. Angad spoke expansively, his attention fluid. He checked his phone often, interrupting himself mid-thought, then resumed without acknowledging the break.

She noticed herself accommodating it. At some point, she realised she was laughing more than she had intended to. Not loudly. Not freely. But often enough to register.

When they left the café, he suggested a walk. He did not ask where she wanted to go. He simply began moving, setting a pace that required her to match him. She did, without comment, lengthening her stride instinctively.

She noticed everything.

At a bookstore, he lingered only briefly, impatient with browsing. He flipped through a few pages, then set the book down with faint disinterest. At an art

supply shop she wanted to stop at, he stood outside scrolling through messages, half-listening when she pointed something out through the window.

She registered all of it. And still—the pull remained. Not nostalgia exactly. Not longing. Recognition.

The sharpness of him. The way he occupied space without apology. The way he spoke as if the world were something to be negotiated on his terms. It had always been this about him—the self-assurance that bordered on disregard, the charm that reframed accommodation as participation rather than erasure.

She remembered, suddenly, what had drawn her to him years ago. Not kindness. Not steadiness. Intensity.

They stopped for late tea. Angad ordered without asking her preference, then corrected himself halfway through.

“You like it strong, right?”

She nodded. He smiled, pleased with himself, as though remembering her preference were proof of continuity rather than coincidence. “You haven’t changed much,” he said.

She wondered if that was true.

He talked about work—about how frustrating it was to feel constrained, about people who did not recognise his potential. He spoke vaguely about his wife, careful not to indict her directly but equally careful not to absolve himself.

She listened. She did not defend Kabir when Angad referred to him dismissively. “He’s Air Force, right?” Angad said at one point.

“Yes.”

“Must be... structured.”

She smiled faintly. “That’s one word for it.”

At no point did Angad touch her. At no point did she feel physically compromised. And yet, she was acutely aware of her body—of how close he stood, of the way she noticed the pull of his shirt across his shoulders when he moved. It disturbed her that she noticed at all.

More unsettling was the absence of guilt.

Nothing had happened. Nothing improper, she told herself. She had not crossed a line because she had not defined one. There had been no secrecy, no deception. She had met an old acquaintance. She had talked. She had walked. That nothing physical had occurred felt like absolution.

In quieter moments—when Angad was distracted, when her attention briefly slipped free of his orbit—she found herself thinking about Sirsa. About what she would take. She mentally sorted through her flat. The pale blue cushions she loved. The ceramic lamps she had picked up on a whim years ago. The throw that always ended up on the back of the couch no matter how neatly she folded it.

She imagined those things in the quarters Kabir had described. Empty rooms filling in, slowly. She wondered where she would put her desk. Whether the light would be right for her plants. Whether the air would feel too dry, too sharp.

The day ended without ceremony. Angad hugged her briefly before leaving. The contact was light, almost careless. “We should do this again,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied, because it seemed easier than interrogating the answer.

That night, her phone buzzed again. *I like how you still listen.*

She stared at the message for a long time before setting the phone face-down on the bed.

Some hundreds of kilometers away, Kabir stood in the living room of his quarters, imagining which wall Aditi would hate most—and which she would quietly fix without ever announcing it.

Both of them were thinking about houses. Both of them were waiting. Neither yet willing to examine what that waiting might cost.

Chapter 21

The day began without ceremony.

Aditi woke early, not because she needed to, but because the light had already crept in—pale and insistent—slipping past the edges of the curtains and settling on the wall opposite the bed. The ceiling fan hummed overhead, stirring air that smelled faintly of detergent and last night's rain.

For a moment she lay still, listening to the city stretch into itself: distant horns, a dog barking, the metallic clatter of shutters being pulled up somewhere below.

This was not a day she had been anticipating. There was no excitement to rise toward, no milestone waiting to be marked. It was simply a day that had been allotted a purpose. Shopping.

She moved through her morning quietly. Brushed her teeth. Washed her face. Put her hair into a low knot without looking too closely at herself in the mirror. The reflection still startled her sometimes—not because it had changed dramatically, but because it looked too composed for how she felt. She made tea and drank it standing at the kitchen counter, scrolling through the notes app on her phone.

Bedsheets. Kitchen towels. Storage containers. A dustbin for the second bathroom. A pressure cooker whistle. Nothing fancy. Nothing that required deliberation beyond size and colour and whether it would last.

These were things for the quarters. The house that technically existed now. The house she had not yet seen.

She dressed with the same practicality—cotton kurta, jeans, flats she could walk in for hours. She picked up her cloth bag and keys and walked out, leaving the bedroom behind her with a sense of mild detachment, as though she were leaving a place that already belonged to her past.

As she stepped out, locking the door behind her, she felt the faintest resistance—an almost-physical hesitation—as though the flat itself were registering her divided loyalties. She dismissed the feeling quickly. Sentimentality was indulgent. Lists were safer.

The first store was crowded. Ceiling fans chopped the air unevenly while salesmen moved between stacks of packaged linen with the efficiency of men who had learned not to feel anything about what they sold. Aditi ran her fingers over bedsheets wrapped in plastic—checking thread count, texture, how the fabric might feel against skin after a long day.

She imagined a bed briefly—bare mattress, white walls, light spilling in through unfamiliar windows. She chose sheets that would soften that strangeness without demanding attention. Neutral colours. Whites edged with grey. Muted blues. Nothing that announced taste or opinion too loudly. She told herself it was better to begin with a blankness that could be filled slowly, deliberately, once she arrived.

Kabir entered these decisions like a watermark rather than a presence. He hovered as an idea in the background of these decisions without quite being him in the room. She saw his hands folding the sheets without being asked, careful with corners, methodical. She saw him approving without comment. The image steadied her, though it remained oddly distant, like something remembered rather than anticipated.

At the next store she bought kitchen towels—absorbent, durable, washable a hundred times over. She did not linger. These were not objects meant to be loved. They were meant to function. There was comfort in that distinction.

By early afternoon, the sun had turned sharp and unforgiving. She ate a quick lunch at a small restaurant—rice, dal, something fried she didn't bother identifying. She scrolled through messages while she ate. There was one from Kabir, sent earlier that morning. *All good there?*

She stared at it longer than necessary, aware of the pause stretching thin. Yes, she typed back. *Just running errands.*

She added a smiley, then deleted it. Sent the message without embellishment. It felt important not to misrepresent the day. Errands were accurate. They required no explanation. There was also a comfort in keeping the exchange spare. It allowed her to continue without opening anything she didn't have the energy to step into fully.

She finished the rest of her shopping by late afternoon. A few knives for the kitchen. Containers that stacked neatly. A small mat for the bathroom floor. Everything fit into her bags without strain, which felt symbolic in a way she did not examine too closely.

By the time she returned home to drop things off, the light had begun to soften. She changed into a fresh kurta, looser, lighter, as though preparing her body for ease. She reapplied kajal without precision, the gesture habitual rather than intentional. She checked the time.

Angad would be waiting. She met him at the edge of the Tibetan Colony, where the lanes narrowed and the city recalibrated itself. The air smelled of garlic and oil and incense, damp stone and cooking meat. Prayer flags hung overhead, frayed and sun-faded, fluttering gently as people moved beneath them.

Angad began talking the moment she arrived. He spoke about traffic, then about work, then about a mutual acquaintance she had not thought of in years. His words overlapped, looping and circling back in a way that felt deeply familiar. He did not ask how she was. He assumed it. She let him.

She listened. She smiled. She nodded in the right places.

They walked without urgency, absorbed into the colony's evening rhythm. Past cafés glowing softly, past bakeries displaying the same pastries they always did, past tourists taking photographs of murals she barely noticed anymore. She felt oddly unburdened here, as though this version of the city asked nothing of her beyond presence.

They didn't plan where to go. They rarely did.

When they reached Majnu Ka Tila, the river lay ahead of them, broad and indifferent. The sky had begun its descent—blue thinning into amber, amber surrendering to dusk, something that felt warm and expansive. The Signature Bridge cut across the horizon in clean lines, its cables already beginning to glow faintly.

They sat near the river's edge, on a low ledge that was smooth from use. Around them, people murmured, laughed, argued softly. A monk walked past, robes brushing the ground. Someone nearby was playing music on a phone, the sound tinny but persistent.

Angad kept talking.

And Aditi became acutely aware of how much she was enjoying this. The ease of it. The absence of effort. The way she didn't have to explain her silences or manage her expressions. The way laughter came without being summoned, rising naturally, as though it had always been waiting just beneath the surface. She was not managing herself. She was simply there.

Kabir surfaced again, steady and unavoidable. Kabir in Sirsa. Kabir in quarters waiting to be filled and that still smelled faintly of fresh paint. Kabir in a life that had been paused rather than abandoned.

Kabir whose absence had been explained so thoroughly it had acquired the weight of inevitability. Eight months, she thought suddenly. More than eight.

Eight months of distance explained carefully and repeatedly—operational needs, schedules that did not bend, duties that did not pause. Eight months of understanding offered freely until it had begun to feel like expectation.

Not absence born of neglect—but absence sustained by choice. He could have come. Not always. Not often. But sometimes.

He had not.

The thought did not burn. It settled in her chest with surprising calm. She did not interrogate it. She did not resist it. She turned it over slowly, like a smooth stone she had been carrying for a while now.

If duty excused distance, then loneliness excused company. The logic felt sound enough to rest upon.

She was not betraying anything. She was not crossing a line. She was meeting a friend. A friend who remembered her without effort. A friend who existed in a time before explanations had been necessary. A friend she had history with, yes—but history was not a crime. History did not demand silence or solitude. History did not ask her to suspend joy indefinitely.

The sun slipped lower, staining the sky in layers—orange thinning into gold, then something quieter, more resigned. The river reflected nothing cleanly, but

the light made even its dull surface seem momentarily forgiving. The city seemed to exhale.

They left the river as darkness gathered. They drifted back into the streets, drawn by hunger. Chaat eaten standing up. Plates shared. Angad insisted she taste something because she “used to love this.”

She did. Or she loved that he remembered.

Delhi hummed around them—rickshaws weaving through traffic, vendors calling out, fragments of songs escaping from passing cars. She felt unmoored from time, as though she were inhabiting an evening that belonged to someone else's life.

By the time Angad dropped her home, happiness sat in her chest like borrowed light—warm, irresponsible, fleeting. It felt borrowed. Illicit in its ease. As though the years between them had folded in on themselves and disappeared, leaving no evidence behind.

Inside her flat, the quiet returned gently. She washed her hands. Put her bags away. Moved through rooms already beginning to feel temporary, already half-imagined as past tense.

At night, she thought of Kabir. She summoned him deliberately—his voice, the steadiness of his presence, the promise of reunion. She willed excitement into being.

And she did. A quick, sharp frisson of happiness cut through her, real and undeniable.

But as sleep drew closer, something Angad had said drifted back into her mind. A familiar cadence. A sentence that belonged to another version of her life. It replaced Kabir without argument.

And she let it. Just for the night.

Chapter 22

That morning her flat greeted her with silence.

Not the comforting kind, not the earned quiet that followed a long day, but a brittle, listening silence that seemed to wait for her to do something—drop a glass, sigh too loudly, call out a name that would not be answered. It felt too big, too hollow, as if the walls had subtly retreated while she was sleeping, expanding the space just enough to make her feel smaller inside it.

She made her tea carefully, almost apologetically, and poured it out. For a moment she didn't move. She stood there with her cup still in her hand, listening: the low, persistent hum of the refrigerator, a lift whirring somewhere in the building, distant traffic rising and falling like breath. The echo of her own breathing sounded intrusive, as though she were disturbing something that had already settled over the night.

Angad had looked so well.

The thought arrived without invitation, without warning. It slipped into her mind as easily as muscle memory, and once it was there, it refused to leave.

He had looked... composed. Grounded. His face carried the lines of age now, a little sharper around the eyes, a little more defined at the jaw, but it suited him. There was something about the way he held himself—less restless than before, less hungry, as if life had shaped him into something firmer. Someone who belonged somewhere.

The realisation brought with it a small, sharp ache, like pressing on an old bruise you'd forgotten was there. And then, as always, memory followed thought.

It came in fragments at first. Disjointed, vivid flashes that refused to be arranged neatly into a story. Half-empty auditoriums where they went to watch experimental plays neither of them fully understood, knees brushing in the dark, their shared confusion turning into shared amusement. Quiet lunches at cafés where they ordered too much food and ended up pushing it around their plates, not very hungry when they were together, intoxicated instead by proximity. Kisses stolen in the hallway of her parents' flat when her mother stepped into another room, the thrill sharpened by risk, by the knowledge that they were not entirely welcome.

Her father's polite reserve rose up in her memory—his measured questions, his careful distance. He had never disapproved openly, never forbade anything, but his restraint had been more powerful than anger. A wall Angad had never quite managed to climb, no matter how earnest his smiles, how respectful his greetings.

She walked into the bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed, still wearing the clothes she'd slept in. The mattress dipped slightly under her weight, familiar and yet suddenly impersonal.

She remembered the first time they had broken up. How young she had been. How absolute everything had felt then.

Angad jealous of a classmate who had walked her to the bus stop too often, his questions edged with suspicion, his affection tipping into something possessive. The argument—sharp, circular, escalating too quickly for either of them to stop it. The slammed door. Her sobbing into her pillow, face pressed into cotton that smelled faintly of detergent and safety, convinced with the fierce certainty of youth that her heart had been permanently broken.

She had believed, with her whole being, that nothing could ever hurt more than that.

Her phone buzzed on the bedside table. She flinched, the sound startling in the quiet.

All good? Coming tomorrow? – Kabir.

Her chest softened despite everything, despite herself.

"Yes. Should be there in the evening," she replied.

She lay down again, staring up at the ceiling fan as it turned slowly above her. The room felt suspended in time, as if waiting for a decision she hadn't yet made.

And then she thought of Kabir properly, deliberately, as if invoking him might anchor her.

Kabir, whose absences were never casual, never careless. Absences dictated by duty, by structure, by things larger than impulse. Flights that took him away, paperwork that swallowed entire evenings, responsibilities that followed him like a shadow. Kabir, who had loved her with a steadiness she had not known before him.

She thought of the house in the station—the one she could do up once she was there tomorrow. Choosing curtains and lamps, small domestic details that felt absurdly significant right now. The colour of the cushions. The placement of books. The plants she would keep alive. As if love could be made tangible through effort. As if care could be rendered visible, arranged neatly into a life.

Her phone buzzed again.

For a brief, foolish second, she expected Kabir's customary ok. Since he left for Sirsa, his messages had grown shorter, more economical. Not cold, exactly, but cautious. As though he were conserving something fragile between them. Especially after that night. After she had said Angad's name without meaning to. Without even realising it until the damage was already done.

But the name on the screen was not Kabir. It was Angad. *Breakfast? Paharganj. We should talk.*

Her fingers hovered over the screen. This was a line she should not cross. She knew that with an almost academic clarity. She knew, too, that loving Kabir did not magically erase the past. It only made it more dangerous.

She could ignore the message. She could delete it. She could pretend she hadn't seen it. Instead, she typed back before she could think better of it. *I'll be there.*

The words looked small and harmless on the screen. Deceptively so. She told herself it was only for closure. That she deserved answers. That unresolved things had a way of poisoning the present. That her love for Kabir was firmly in its place—steady, chosen, deliberate.

Yet.

Yet she couldn't stop thinking of Angad. Of the intensity of what they had been. Of how he had made her feel precious, singular, as if the world narrowed to the space between them. Of his hand enveloping hers as they crossed busy roads, protective and possessive all at once. Of him waiting outside her college gates, pretending to check his phone while watching only her.

The past rose up around her, warm and suffocating.

The café was one of those places that survived on anonymity. Tucked into a side lane in Paharganj, it had dim lighting and mismatched chairs, the kind salvaged from other cafés, other decades. The faint smell of burnt coffee beans mingled with old paperbacks stacked haphazardly on shelves, their spines faded, their titles half-forgotten. It was the sort of place people came to when they didn't want to be seen—or when they wanted to pretend they were somewhere else entirely.

Aditi arrived early. She chose a table near the wall, her back to a bookshelf, facing the door. Her hands trembled faintly as she wrapped them around her cup, the warmth grounding her. She told herself she was calm. She told herself this was just a conversation.

Then she saw him. Angad came in through the old doors. He wore a simple shirt with the sleeves rolled up, the way he used to when they went out for long lunches that turned into evenings.

There was a familiarity to him that hit her first, before thought, before reason. His posture. The way he leaned forward with his elbows on the table, fingers laced, as if bracing himself for something. For her.

When their eyes met, something tightened in her chest. "Thanks for coming," he said, standing halfway, then thinking better of it and sitting back down.

She nodded and took the chair opposite him. The space between them felt charged, compressed by history. "You said it was important," she said.

He laughed softly, without humour. "Everything feels important when you realise you're running out of time."

The words settled between them, heavy and dangerous.

They ordered tea out of habit more than desire. Neither of them touched the cups when they arrived.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Angad began, rubbing his thumb along the rim of his cup. "I know that. You just got married. I saw you yesterday—" He stopped, swallowed. "You looked beautiful."

"Angad," she said, gently but firmly. "Why did you ask me here?"

He looked at her then, really looked at her, as if committing her face to memory. "Because my marriage is failing," he said quietly. "And I wanted nothing more than to see you again"

The words struck her with physical force. Her breath caught. The café seemed to recede around them, sounds dulling, edges blurring.

"My wife knows," he went on, his voice low. "She's known for a while that something in me was... elsewhere. I thought time would fix it. That ambition would fix it. That distance would fix it." He shook his head. "But you don't fix the absence of someone by replacing them with things."

Aditi felt dizzy. She gripped the edge of the table, grounding herself in the texture of chipped wood.

"I let you go," he said, and now his voice shook. "I chose work. Money. The idea of a future I thought I wanted. And I told myself you'd be fine. That you were strong, that you'd move on." He let out a bitter laugh. "I didn't think about what I was losing."

She shook her head slowly. "Angad, you can't say these things to me. Not now."

"I know," he said. "But I needed you to know that I regret it. Every day. Seeing you again—married to someone else—made it impossible to pretend anymore."

She stood abruptly, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. The sound drew a few curious glances from nearby tables. "I'm married," she said, her voice steadier than she felt. "To Kabir. I chose him. I love him."

"I know," Angad said, looking up at her. "And I'm not asking you to leave him." He paused. "I just needed you to know the truth."

She didn't trust herself to say anything else. She turned and walked out, the bell above the door chiming too brightly, too cheerfully, for the weight she carried with her back into the world.

Chapter 23

Aditi chose the late-evening train deliberately.

Not the first one that would have landed her before sunset, demanding rearrangements, rushed drives, apologies murmured into phones. Not the overnight one either, that would have deposited her into the raw blue of early morning when Kabir would already be dressed, already moving, already elsewhere.

This one arrived just after dusk—late enough to be unobtrusive, early enough to still belong to the day. She told herself it was practical, considerate.

She packed with that same logic: carefully, methodically, refusing to let the tremor in her hands dictate what went into the suitcase. Clothes folded flat. Toiletries decanted into travel bottles. Bedsheets her mother insisted she take—*these will make the place feel like home*—slipped into a separate bag because they were bulky and smelled faintly of the cupboard they'd lived in for years.

But beneath the practicality lay something far less controlled.

Anticipation.

It moved through her in quiet waves as the train cut northward—through stations she barely registered, landscapes that passed like unfinished thoughts. She watched reflections in the window more than the scenery outside: her own face, softened by motion, eyes bright in a way she didn't quite recognise.

She hadn't seen Kabir properly in months. Not on a screen, not in brief snatched calls between his briefings and her careful routines. Not in fragments. Not in apologies and silences. In person.

The idea of it sat low in her chest, warm and almost frightening. What did one do with longing that had nowhere to go for so long? What shape did it take when it finally had somewhere to land?

The train slowed as it approached the cantonment, metal screaming against metal in that familiar, almost violent way that made some travellers flinch and others barely look up. The platform lights came into view—too bright, too white—throwing sharp shadows onto concrete that had seen decades of boots, suitcases, reunions, departures.

The station was awake. It always was.

The air was thick with smells that didn't blend so much as collide—fried snacks, diesel, dust, damp cloth, tea boiling somewhere nearby. Porters called out in voices trained to cut through chaos. Families clustered around pillars, holding places and one another. Soldiers in various stages of uniform and exhaustion moved through the crowd with practiced ease.

Aditi stood near the door as the train shuddered to a halt. The anticipation sharpened suddenly, turning almost painful.

Then she saw him. Kabir stood a little away from the main flow of people, near a pillar where the light softened instead of glaring. He wasn't leaning, wasn't scrolling on his phone, wasn't pacing.

He was standing still. As if movement might make him miss her. He wore plain blue jeans and a grey t-shirt—nothing remarkable, nothing tailored, nothing that announced rank or role. And yet he looked impossibly handsome in a way that caught her breath entirely off guard.

Thinner. That was the first thing she noticed. Not in a way that suggested weakness—never that—but as if the last months had pared him down to something leaner, sharper. The angles of his face were more pronounced. His jaw carried a quiet severity she didn't remember. His hair was damp, as if he had showered in a hurry, unsure how much time he had before she arrived.

And his eyes. She had forgotten how vivid they were in real life—brown so dark they bordered on black, steady and searching even now, scanning faces, registering arrivals and disappointments with controlled restraint.

Then his gaze found hers. For a moment—just a fraction of a second—he didn't move.

His face shifted, not into a grin, not into anything dramatic. Just a small, restrained smile, as if he wasn't sure how much joy he was allowed to show without overwhelming the moment. As if he was afraid that too much expression might break something fragile between them.

Aditi didn't hesitate. Her smile bloomed fully, radiant and unmistakably happy, the kind she hadn't let herself wear in a long time.

He saw it—and something in his shoulders eased.

They met somewhere between the train door and the pillar, awkward for half a beat, unsure whether to hug, to touch, to acknowledge distance or ignore it.

He settled for her name. "Aditi."

Her own voice surprised her with its steadiness. "Kabir."

As if they needed reminding.

She was very happy to see him. The happiness was immediate and unmistakable, but it did not translate into speech. It pressed inward instead, heavy and bright at once, leaving her uncertain of how to move through it.

"How was the journey?" he asked, already reaching for the largest of her bags with an instinctive familiarity that made her chest tighten.

"Long," she said. "But fine."

"You didn't eat?"

She shook her head. "Not really hungry."

He nodded, accepting it without question, as if storing the information rather than reacting to it. He lifted the bag easily, slinging it over his shoulder, then took another from her hand before she could protest.

They walked together toward the exit. The platform noise fell away behind them, replaced by the quieter, disciplined sounds of a cantonment town at evening—trees moving faintly, a distant whistle, the measured hush of space designed to contain itself.

Outside the station, the night had settled fully. The drive to the base passed in a quiet that was not uncomfortable, but not entirely easy either. Kabir drove carefully, one hand steady on the steering wheel, the other resting casually on the gear stick. The dashboard lights cast his face in soft blue and amber, highlighting the planes of his cheekbones, the faint shadow of stubble he hadn't bothered to shave.

Aditi watched him without trying to hide it. This was him, here, solid and present. Not a voice. Not a face on a screen that froze mid-sentence. Not someone always about to leave.

She thought of the quarters he had described—small, sparse, temporary. She thought of mornings yet to come, of routines they would invent, of the strange, hopeful act of beginning again in a place that didn't yet belong to either of them.

That thought—*beginning again*—made something else stir.

Angad.

The name surfaced unbidden, unwanted, like a ghost she had hoped would stay quiet.

Without quite thinking it through, she reached for her phone and typed a brief message. Neutral. Contained. The kind of thing that meant nothing and yet meant too much.

Kabir noticed the movement. Not because he was watching her—he wasn't—but because he was acutely aware of her presence in the car, every shift, every breath. The glow of her screen reflected faintly against the windshield. He didn't ask. He was just... happy she was here.

The house stood quietly, pale in the early dusk. Identical to the others in structure, but already marked by the fact of waiting. He hesitated at the door, keys in hand. "I should warn you," he said lightly, though there was an apology threaded through it. "It's... small."

Aditi stepped inside and looked around. Bare walls. A single mattress on the floor. A folding table. A couple of chairs that didn't match. A bedsheet folded and draped awkwardly over the window to serve as a curtain.

"It's fine," she said immediately, and meant it. Inside, the emptiness surprised her. Not in a bleak way—just in its clarity. The rooms echoed faintly. White walls. Clean floors. Windows that had not yet learned what they would hold.

He watched her as she moved from room to room, touching nothing, simply seeing. As if mapping the space into something that already belonged to them both.

While she unpacked, Kabir laid out dinner—something basic he had picked up earlier, careful not to overdo it. They spread a sheet on the floor and sat facing each other, plates balanced between them. The posture felt almost intimate in

its ordinariness, the quiet punctuated by small talk about families, about who had sent what, about the absurdity of transporting household items across cities.

Her phone vibrated once.

She glanced at it reflexively, then stopped herself. Picked it up. Typed a brief reply. Kabir noticed the faint, involuntary smile that touched her mouth—there and gone before she seemed aware of it. She placed the phone face down and slid it onto silent.

He noticed that too. Something shifted inside him—not sharply, not dramatically. Just enough to register.

She spoke animatedly, enthusiasm spilling out now that the journey was over. Kabir felt something like calm settle into him. Just because she was there.

Later, when the lights were off and the mattress laid out, she protested weakly when he insisted on sleeping on the floor.

“You don’t have to,” she said.

“I do,” he replied gently, shutting down the argument before it could begin.

She called her parents, speaking softly, reassuring them she had arrived safely. Kabir listened from the other side of the room, the certainty forming quietly, painfully—that earlier message had not been for them. He didn’t say anything.

When the room went dark, silence stretched between them—not hostile, not empty, just... heavy.

Her phone glowed again. He saw it. Darkness settled around them, broken only by the faint outline of the window and the sound of his breathing from the floor.

“I missed you,” Kabir said quietly.

The words were unguarded. They did not carry accusation. They simply existed.

She turned onto her side, facing his direction though she could not see him.

“I thought,” he continued, carefully, “that distance might help. That time would... settle things. That it might help with the healing. With the love.” He paused. “It didn’t.”

Her chest tightened.

"I kept wondering," he said, voice lower now, "if I still... if I still existed for you."

She asked then, quietly, "Do you think... do you think we can go back? Can we... restart?"

To how we were?"

He didn't answer at first.

She pressed, gently. "I mean — not our whole life. Not in some dramatic way. Just — us. Little things. Walks. Tea. Talking about books and the strange people we meet at grocery stores. Could we start there again?" Her voice wasn't desperate. It was hopeful — the fragile kind.

He closed his eyes. "I can't," he said.

The word landed with the soundlessness of snow. "Why?" she asked.

Kabir lay staring at the ceiling, listening to the fan hum, to his own breath. "I don't know," he said finally. "I don't know if all the ghosts are gone yet. Or if I'm still standing in a place where you once wanted to see someone else — and I can't pretend I don't think about it."

She went still. "That was never the case," she said quietly. "You were not a substitute. You were not filling anyone's absence. You — you were yourself. And I... I love you."

"I know," he said. "And I love you. More than I thought was possible."

"But—"

"But I can't be my earlier self yet."

She felt something tighten in her throat. The conversation moved on to safer ground. Neither mentioned the small collapse that had just happened between them.

They lay awake, each thinking in parallel, until sleep came—not as a resolution, but as a pause.

And in that small, sparse house, with its borrowed curtain and mismatched linens, something fragile but real took root—not certainty, not closure—but the quiet courage to stay.

Chapter 24

Morning did not arrive all at once.

It entered the house gradually, as if uncertain of its welcome—light slipping through the bedsheets that served as curtains in thin bands, the air cooling briefly before the day remembered where it was. Somewhere outside, a gate clanged shut. A distant scooter coughed awake and moved on. The sounds arrived without urgency, assembling themselves into morning.

Aditi woke before the alarm she had set out of habit, though there was nowhere she needed to be. For a moment, she lay still.

The mattress beneath her was unfamiliar—not uncomfortable, just new enough to require attention. Her body had not yet learned its language, the slight dip near the edge, the way it resisted turning. On the floor beside her, Kabir lay on the blanket they had spread the night before, one arm folded across his chest, the other resting by his side. He had insisted, gently but firmly, that it was fine. Temporary. Until the bed arrived. Until things settled.

His breathing was even, controlled, as though sleep for him was something managed rather than surrendered to. She watched him without moving.

In sleep, his face looked younger. The sharpness softened, the habitual alertness eased. The tension that usually lived around his mouth had loosened, though not entirely. There were lines there now she did not remember earning their place—small, precise marks, as if etched by repetition rather than time.

She wondered, not for the first time, how much of his life had happened without her knowing the cost.

The thought made something in her chest tighten. She turned away before it could settle, before it demanded anything of her.

Carefully, she shifted off the mattress, mindful not to disturb him. The sheet whispered faintly. Her feet touched the cool floor. She stood there a moment, adjusting to the height of the ceiling, the emptiness of the room. Boxes lined one wall, still taped shut. The wardrobe stood bare, its shelves echoing.

She reached for her phone out of reflex, checked the time, then stopped herself and slipped it back onto the bedside table, screen down. There would be enough of that later. In the kitchen, she moved quietly.

The house was still mostly empty, but sound travelled easily through it—every cupboard opening, every utensil placed down with even slight care. The kitchen itself was compact, efficient. The counters were clean, unused, almost too bright. She liked that. It felt like a promise.

She made tea the way she always did, measured and unthinking, muscle memory guiding her hands. Water filled the kettle. Tea leaves were spooned carefully into the strainer. Milk waited in the fridge, unopened, its seal intact.

When the kettle whistled, she turned it off immediately, almost reflexively, as though noise itself were something to be managed.

She moved to the window and pushed it open.

Outside, the colony was already awake but not noisy. It was a working kind of morning. A woman walked past with a child in uniform, her dupatta tucked firmly at the waist, her grip on the child's hand secure without being tight. A man cycled by slowly, newspaper folded under one arm. Someone was sweeping leaves into a careful pile, the sound rhythmic, soothing, as if the day itself were being tidied into shape.

Aditi poured the tea.

The kettle gave a final, unnecessary hiss and she laughed softly, immediately conscious of the sound, glancing once toward the bedroom. Nothing stirred. She relaxed.

She drank standing by the counter, looking out, noticing how the air smelled faintly of grass and something metallic she still could not place. New paint, perhaps. Or pipes warming. Or simply a different part of the city asserting itself.

This place, she thought, does not rush.

Kabir woke to the whistle of the kettle—another thing Aditi had brought from her flat, tucked into one of the boxes without comment. He registered the sound without opening his eyes. The ceiling above him was unfamiliar, its faint hairline crack running diagonally like a marker he hadn't yet memorised.

He lay still for a few moments longer than usual, eyes open now, staring upward.

The night had not left him.

It lingered, heavy and unresolved, like a conversation paused mid-sentence. He could feel it in the way his shoulders remained slightly tense, the way his jaw stayed set even at rest. He did not allow himself to follow its threads. There would be time for that later. There always was.

He rose quietly, folding the blanket with practiced efficiency. He dressed for his run without turning on the light, movements economical, familiar. Shoes. Watch. Keys.

As he stepped outside, the sun had climbed just enough to make the air crisp and bright. He inhaled deeply, letting the cool settle in his lungs.

He ran as he always did—steady, contained, refusing excess. His pace was disciplined, almost meditative. The rhythm of his feet on the pavement, the regulated pattern of his breath, the familiar burn in his calves—all of it held him together.

This was why he ran. The mind could only wander so far when the body demanded attention.

And yet, the conversation from the night before kept circling him, persistent despite his effort to outrun it. The way Aditi had been quiet. Not withdrawn—just slightly elsewhere. The way she had checked her phone once, then again, her mouth curving into a light, reflexive smile she hadn't seemed aware of.

Every fibre in him wanted to turn back, to tell her that he loved her desperately, that he wanted nothing more than the relationship they had had—the ease, the warmth, the unthinking closeness.

But that smile. After all this time?

He lengthened his stride, pushed harder, until the thought blurred at the edges.

When he returned, sweat-darkened and silent, Aditi had already made a second round of tea. The cups were different—mismatched, borrowed from the canteen, their rims faintly chipped. She handed him one without ceremony.

They sat on the floor of the living room, backs against opposite walls, legs stretched out, cups warming their hands. The house echoed faintly, sound bouncing just enough to remind them of its emptiness.

“Sleep okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said easily. “You?”

He nodded. “Fine.”

They did not elaborate. They did not need to.

The day unfolded from there, ordinary and deliberate. She rose first, retrieving a tape measure from her bag. She began moving through the rooms, murmuring numbers under her breath—window widths, wall lengths, distances between switches and corners. She noted them in her phone, occasionally stopping to imagine furniture in place, movement paths, light at different times of day.

Kabir watched. He leaned against doorways, arms folded loosely, expression neutral. He said nothing unless she asked. When she did, his answers were immediate and precise. He had already noticed the same things she was measuring. He had been living inside these rooms for days now, learning their moods, their sounds, where the light fell strongest in the afternoon, which corners stayed cool.

At one point, her phone vibrated. She did not look at it immediately. There was a pause—barely perceptible, but real. Then she picked it up, glanced at the screen, and typed quickly. Her mouth softened, there and gone in less than a second. She placed the phone back into her pocket and resumed measuring.

Kabir noticed. He did not react. Inside him, something shifted—not violently, not enough to dislodge him from where he stood. It was more like a hairline fracture extending quietly, unseen unless one knew where to look.

He told himself it was nothing. People smiled at messages all the time. It did not mean what his mind wanted it to mean.

They moved into the bedroom.

She stood near the window, holding the tape measure taut, eyes narrowed slightly as she concentrated. He watched the way she moved—confident, efficient, already inhabiting the space. The house seemed to respond to her presence, as though waiting had always been temporary.

“We’ll need curtains here,” she said. “And rods. I’ll note it.”

“Yes,” he said. “There’s a store near the gate. We can check.”

She nodded, fingers flying over her screen.

The morning stretched into afternoon. They went to the canteen first, bought bread, eggs, basic supplies. Then to the small store outside the base. It sold everything from plastic buckets to plates, from brooms to extension cords. She chose deliberately. A drying stand. A cheap wall clock. Kitchen organisers. A pressure cooker whose lid felt reassuringly heavy.

Kabir paid without comment.

They drove into the city next, traffic thickening as the sun climbed. They walked through furniture stores, the smell of polished wood and dust clinging to the air. The beds seemed too big for their room, the sofas too plush or too fragile.

Aditi measured. Aditi chose.

A sturdy bed, simple lines. A small sofa. A compact coffee table. Shelves that could be moved if needed. A fridge, a microwave, a washing machine.

“If I buy alone, I’ll choose badly,” he admitted once, standing back as she examined a table.

She smiled, quick and warm. “You chose me.”

The words hung between them. He didn’t trust himself to reply.

His mother called while they were loading boxes into the car, emotional and organised in equal measure, promising to send things they still had boxed from the wedding. Bedsheets they had received. A toaster. Some utensils she insisted were better quality.

Life was expanding, he realised, in small increments—tea cups, dinner plates, two woks, rags, a cheap rug rolled awkwardly under his arm.

They walked along the station roads later, stopping for chai at a stall that smelled of ginger and steam. They talked about nothing important. The traffic. The weather. Which store had better prices.

Sometimes they said very little at all and it felt enough. Almost. Because there were moments.

Small ones.

Her phone stayed on silent—practical, she said, because calls irritated her while she was busy. But the vibrations were constant: soft, brief, persistent. She picked it up casually, thumb moving quickly, expression shading into something thoughtful—not secretive, not guilty, but inward.

Kabir told himself it was work. Friends. He also noticed every shift between silence and that quiet, vibrating tether to another conversation he couldn't see.

Back at the house, they unpacked. Boxes were opened. Items found places. They set things down in stages. Shoes lined up near the wall. Bags emptied onto the floor. The cheap wall clock was propped against a box, not yet hung, already claiming the idea of time. Aditi rinsed the cups they had used earlier, wiped the counter without being asked, folded the dishcloth and hung it carefully. The kitchen began to look inhabited—spices lined up, a dishcloth hung near the new gas burner. Aditi moved with purpose, fitting things into drawers, already establishing a logic. These were small acts, instinctive ones, but they carried intention. This is how a place learns you, Kabir thought. Through repetition. Through care.

Kabir followed, assembling furniture, tightening screws, aligning shelves. At one point, she brushed past him in the narrow hallway. She did not touch him. Not even by accident.

He noticed that too.

By evening, the house held their presence. Not fully, not comfortably—but recognisably. He assembled the last shelf, tightening the screws until they resisted. He liked that feeling—the certainty of something fixed. Aditi spread the rug where she imagined the sofa would go, smoothing its corners with her palms. She stepped back, assessed, nodded to herself.

Nesting, Kabir realised. That quiet, ancient impulse to make shelter out of space.

And yet—

He stood there, screwdriver still in hand, watching her move through the room as though through memory rather than discovery. The house was filling. They were doing everything right.

Still, in his gut, the feeling remained. A low, steady unease. As if something essential had not arrived with them.

They sat on the floor again, eating takeout from cartons, legs crossed, shoulders almost but not quite touching.

Kabir watched her as she ate, the way she leaned forward slightly, the way she laughed at something on the new television without looking at him.

She was there with him. Yet she wasn't the same girl he had once walked with.

Something was different. Something was off.

He did not say it. He would not say it.

Not today.

Chapter 25

The conversations with Angad began to lengthen almost without Aditi noticing when they had crossed that line.

At first, they were brief—stray messages that arrived at odd hours, questions that felt harmless in their phrasing. *How are you, really? Do you ever think about those days?* It had seemed natural enough, even inevitable. There was history there, and history, she told herself, did not disappear simply because time had passed. It lay dormant, waiting for a moment of weakness, or nostalgia, or curiosity.

She told herself she was strong enough now. That whatever they spoke about would remain contained, sealed off from her present life like a museum exhibit—interesting, distant, harmless. A glass case she could peer into without disturbing what lay inside.

But Angad had a way of lingering.

He never rushed a conversation toward closure. He left thoughts unfinished, questions hanging in the air, like doors left ajar on purpose. He had always done that—kept things suspended, unresolved, so that she remained engaged, waiting for the next sentence, the next reassurance, the next explanation that never quite came.

Slowly, imperceptibly, Aditi found herself replying more fully. Elaborating where she could have ended a sentence. Explaining when she could have let silence do the work. She noticed how easily she slipped into old rhythms with him, how familiar his cadence felt, how quickly her mind adjusted itself to his pace.

They spoke about the past often. Not in specifics at first—no dates or arguments or turning points—but in broad, sentimental strokes. He talked about *that phase*, about how intense it had been, how rare. How people spent lifetimes chasing what they had stumbled into so young.

“You know,” he said once, his voice thoughtful, almost reverent, “some connections don’t really end. They just... pause.”

Aditi had smiled at the screen then, a reflex more than a feeling. The idea was flattering in the way old myths always were—familiar, comforting, deeply unexamined. It allowed him to frame their ending as accidental rather than inevitable, suspended rather than concluded.

But as the days passed, she began to notice a pattern.

Angad spoke often of *what could have been*. It was his favourite phrase, delivered with a wistfulness that bordered on performance. He spoke of the life they might have had if timing had been kinder, if circumstances had aligned, if he had been different—though that last part was never said outright.

“What we had was ahead of its time,” he said one evening, as if describing a work of art misunderstood by its era. “We were too young. Too intense. If we’d met later, things would have been different.”

Different how? she wondered, but did not ask.

Because when he spoke of the past, he did so selectively. He remembered the passion, the urgency, the way she had once looked at him as if he were the centre of her universe. He remembered being wanted, being chosen, being the axis around which her emotions had spun.

What he did not remember—what he never brought up—were the absences.

The cancelled plans. The weeks he had vanished into work without explanation. The way she had learned to measure time by his availability, not her own needs. The arguments that ended not in resolution but exhaustion, her tears met with his irritation, his silence framed as maturity rather than withdrawal.

When she mentioned these things gently, cautiously, he waved them away.

“That was just immaturity,” he said. “We were kids. I didn’t know how to balance things then.”

But there was no apology in his tone. No reckoning. Just a dismissal, as though those moments were minor footnotes in an otherwise epic story. As though her pain had been incidental rather than structural.

And Aditi began to feel something shift inside her—not pain exactly, but a loosening. A sense of something coming undone.

He spoke increasingly in the language of destiny. Of unfinished business. Of threads that had never been properly tied.

“I sometimes feel like you were my great almost,” he told her one night. “The one I never quite got over.”

It should have felt romantic. It should have stirred something deep and aching inside her. Instead, it left her oddly hollow.

Because even as he spoke, she realized he was not asking how she had survived their ending. He did not ask what it had cost her. He did not ask who she had become in the years since, or what loving him had taught her, or how she had put herself back together afterward.

He spoke as though she had been preserved exactly as he had left her—waiting, paused, untouched by time. As though her life had been on hold until he returned to reflect on it.

There were moments when Kabir entered the conversation, though never directly. Angad never asked about him outright, never spoke his name unless prompted. Instead, he referred to him obliquely, as if to avoid granting him substance.

“He seems... steady,” Angad said once, after Aditi mentioned something casually about her marriage. The word carried a faint edge, sharpened by what he did not say. “Very different from me.”

She sensed the comparison immediately—not between two men, but between two versions of herself. The one who had loved Angad, and the one who had chosen Kabir.

Angad never criticised Kabir outright. That would have required acknowledging him as real competition. Instead, he framed himself as something else entirely—not an alternative, but an inevitability.

"I think some people come into your life to show you what passion feels like," he said softly. "Others give you comfort. Both matter. But they're not the same."

It was said with such quiet certainty that it took Aditi a moment to recognise the manipulation beneath it. The subtle positioning of himself as the irreplaceable experience, the standard against which all other loves would fall short.

For the first time, she felt a flicker of irritation.

Because what Angad called passion, she remembered as anxiety. What he called intensity, she remembered as imbalance. The highs had been real—but so had the constant sense of bracing herself for the next disappointment, the vigilance, the feeling that love was something she had to earn repeatedly.

And Kabir—steady, present, unglamorous in his reliability—had never once made her feel like she was waiting to be chosen.

The conversations continued, but something in her had shifted from immersion to observation.

She began to hear the repetition in Angad's words. The way he circled the same ideas, the same regrets, without ever moving toward accountability. He spoke of timing, of fate, of youth—never of choice.

When she asked him once, directly, "Do you ever think about why we didn't work?" he paused for a long moment.

"I think the world got in the way," he said finally.

Not *I did*. Not *we did*. The world—an amorphous villain, conveniently blameless.

It was then that Aditi understood something fundamental: Angad had not changed. He had merely refined his language.

The self-absorption was still there, cloaked now in introspection. The emotional inertia remained, disguised as wistfulness. He was still telling the same story, only with better words, a more convincing melancholy.

And in that story, she was still a supporting character.

He spoke of his loneliness often. Of how nothing since had measured up. Of how relationships felt pale in comparison to what they had shared.

“You ruined me for other women,” he said once, half-laughing, half-serious.

It should have felt like a compliment. Instead, it felt like a burden. Because she realised then that Angad did not love *her*—not the woman she was now, with her boundaries and clarity and hard-earned selfhood. He loved the version of her that had loved him without conditions.

The girl who had bent herself into shapes that fit his life. The one who had waited.

She began to notice how often his longing required her silence, her affirmation, her emotional labour. How rarely he asked what she needed from these conversations. How quickly the focus returned to his sense of loss, his unresolved feelings, his nostalgia.

And perhaps most unsettling of all, she realised that if she were to step back into his orbit, nothing would be different. The dynamic would resume exactly where it had left off. His needs at the centre. Her adjustments at the margins.

The repetition was unmistakable once she saw it.

Angad was not offering her a future. He was offering her a loop.

One evening, as she set her phone down after another long exchange, Aditi sat quietly and let the feeling settle. It was not heartbreak. It was not longing. It was disillusionment.

The kind that arrives not with a crash, but with clarity. The kind that strips away fantasy not by force, but by exposure. By showing, again and again, the same shape beneath the surface. She saw now that what she had mistaken for unfinished business was simply an unfinished pattern—one she had outgrown.

Angad would always speak of what could have been, because it absolved him of responsibility for what was. He would always centre his longing, because it required nothing of him except memory.

And she, finally, no longer needed to be the place where his regrets came to rest.

For the first time since their conversations had begun, she did not feel compelled to reply immediately.

The silence did not ache. It felt like relief. Yet the relief was not clean. It did not arrive as resolution or certainty. It settled instead like a pause between breaths—space enough to think, but not enough to be free.

Because even as Angad's hold loosened, something else tugged at her from the opposite direction. Kabir.

His presence was not loud in her mind; it rarely was. He did not intrude or demand attention. He existed instead in the background of her days, steady and unyielding, like a constant horizon. In the way he checked in without expectation. In the way he listened without turning her words into mirrors of himself. In the way he stayed.

And yet—there were moments when she found herself holding Angad's words up against Kabir's silences, comparing textures that did not want to be compared. Angad was memory and heat and familiarity. Kabir was now and ground and gravity. One reminded her of who she had been; the other asked her to become who she already was.

She hated that loving Kabir did not erase Angad entirely. She hated that clarity did not come with amnesia.

There were nights when she lay awake beside Kabir, listening to the measured rhythm of his breathing, and felt a pang—not of doubt, but of guilt. Because loving him felt honest, but it also felt heavier for having come after something else. Because some part of her wondered whether loving two men in different ways meant she was betraying both.

Angad had loved her loudly, urgently, possessively. Kabir loved her quietly, deliberately, without spectacle. Angad made her feel chosen in bursts; Kabir made her feel safe continuously. One lit fires. The other built shelter.

And she loved them both—not equally, not interchangeably, but undeniably.

She loved Angad for the girl she had been with him, for the intensity that had shaped her, scarred her, taught her what love could cost. She loved Kabir for the woman she was now, for the calm that did not feel like resignation, for the partnership that did not require performance.

But love, she was learning, did not resolve itself simply because it had matured. Old love did not disappear when new love arrived. It merely changed shape—shrinking, echoing, resurfacing at inopportune moments.

What terrified her was not that she still felt something for Angad. It was that she could see clearly now—and clarity did not make the choice easier. It made it heavier.

Because clarity meant acknowledging that Angad represented a door she could reopen, even if it led nowhere new. And Kabir represented a path that required her to walk forward without looking back so often.

Angad asked her to remember. Kabir asked her to live.

She realised then that her silence with Angad was not just relief—it was grief. Grief for a version of love that would never become what she once hoped it might. And her quiet with Kabir was not complacency—it was trust. The kind that grows not from intensity, but from repetition.

Still, the ache remained. She was torn not between two men, but between two truths: that she had loved deeply once, and that she loved deeply still. That both loves were real. That only one could be lived.

And for the first time, Aditi allowed herself to admit the most frightening thing of all—not aloud, not to anyone else, but to herself: That loving Kabir did not mean Angad had meant nothing. And letting go of Angad did not mean she loved Kabir any less.

It only meant that love, like life, did not offer clean divisions. Only choices.

And the courage to stand inside them.

Chapter 26

Days bled into weeks.

Not abruptly, not with ceremony—but the way ink spreads in water, edges softening until one day you realise there is no clear boundary between what was and what is. The house stopped announcing itself as new. The echo faded. The rooms learned their functions. Dust settled into predictable corners. The clock Aditi had propped against a box was finally mounted, its quiet ticking threading itself through their evenings.

The furniture arrived in batches. First the bed—solid, heavier than Kabir had expected, its headboard catching the light in the afternoons. Then the sofa, firm and unassuming, its fabric already bearing the faint impression of use. The coffee table followed, along with shelves that Kabir assembled with quiet satisfaction, tightening screws until they resisted completely, until nothing wobbled.

Boxes from home came next. His mother's handwriting on the labels made something in his chest tighten in a way he didn't comment on. Bedsheets folded with ceremonial care. A brass horse wrapped in newspaper. The toaster she had promised. Old steel cookware that had outlived trends and kitchens alike.

Aditi unpacked those boxes more slowly. She handled each item as if it carried a memory she didn't want to disturb. She washed everything before placing it in cupboards, wiped shelves again even when they were already clean. She folded and refolded linen until it sat just right. Kabir watched, recognising the ritual for what it was—not fussiness, but anchoring.

Gradually, the house filled with their rhythms.

Aditi claimed a corner of the sofa, near the armrest, where the light fell cleanly through the window. Her laptop lived there now. A cushion tucked behind her lower back. Her tea balanced on the coffee table, forgotten until it went cold. She worked there for hours, occasionally shifting positions, legs folded beneath her, hair tied up and then let loose again.

Kabir noticed that she always chose the same spot. It pleased him more than it should have. Something about consistency soothed him. He returned to his regular days at the squadron.

The rhythm was familiar, grounding. Briefings that began on time. Weather updates. Ops schedules pinned and revised. The faint, constant smell of fuel and metal that no amount of washing ever truly removed from a flying base.

He flew with ease. Not recklessness—never that—but a confidence that came from having nothing left to prove. The aircraft responded to him the way a well-trained body responds to instinct. Procedures flowed without conscious effort. Emergencies, when they came, were handled with calm efficiency.

The younger pilots watched him. Not overtly, not in a way that would embarrass them or him—but he saw it in the way they stood a little straighter during briefings, the way they listened when he spoke, the way they glanced at him after sorties, searching for approval without daring to ask for it.

He gave them what he always had: precision. His debriefs were meticulous. No bravado, no storytelling flourishes. Just clean timelines, clear decisions, honest assessment of errors—his and theirs. He made notes where needed, asked questions that cut to the heart of an issue without humiliating anyone.

Paperwork, too, was flawless. Forms submitted on time. Flight logs immaculate. Recommendations written with care. He did not inflate. He did not diminish. He understood the weight of words in a service where careers could hinge on a line written—or omitted.

There was satisfaction in that. A quiet one.

When the day ended, when he drove back through the familiar gates, something inside him loosened. The house no longer felt provisional. It felt expected. Back home every night, it felt more and more like he belonged. Like Aditi had made the house—and him—better.

They developed small habits without discussing them. Evening walks around the station became routine. Sometimes after dinner, sometimes before. The

light would be fading, the air cooling just enough to invite movement. They walked side by side, unhurried, occasionally brushing shoulders but never quite touching long enough to register as intimacy.

Aditi noticed things Kabir never would have. A flowering branch fallen after a storm. A curve in the road where the sunset lingered a moment longer. A stray dog that followed them for half a stretch before losing interest. She bent to pet animals without hesitation, crouching, speaking softly, her entire posture shifting into something gentler.

Kabir watched her then, a fondness settling into him like muscle memory. They brought small things home. Pretty branches that somehow, inexplicably, Aditi made look intentional in vases. Pebbles placed on the windowsill. A second plant, then a third. The house acquired corners that existed purely because she noticed them.

On the surface, it was good. Better than good.

Yet—

There was a faraway look in her sometimes.

Not sadness. Not distraction. Something subtler. As if a part of her attention was tuned to a frequency he couldn't hear.

It showed itself in small pauses. In the way she sometimes stared at her phone a beat too long before locking the screen. In how she would agree to something—yes, of course—and then ask him to repeat what he'd just said. In the way her laughter occasionally arrived half a second late, as if summoned rather than spontaneous.

Kabir told himself it meant nothing. Everyone carried internal weather. He knew that better than most. He had learned, over years of service, the difference between instinct and anxiety. This, he insisted, was the latter. Adjustment. Fatigue. The residue of too many changes layered too closely together.

At night, they learned each other's sleeping patterns. Kabir fell asleep quickly, his body trained for rest whenever it was offered. Aditi took longer. She lay still, eyes open in the dark, breathing measured. Sometimes she turned toward him, her forehead resting lightly against his shoulder blade, careful not to wake him. Sometimes she turned away, curling inward, as if protecting something private even from sleep.

He noticed. He did not comment.

Mornings unfolded with quiet efficiency. Kabir woke early, habit immutable. He shaved, dressed, drank his coffee standing by the counter. Aditi woke later, padding into the kitchen wrapped in his old sweatshirt, hair still damp from the shower. She liked her mornings slow. He liked that she did not apologise for it.

On weekends, time expanded. They ate meals without looking at the clock. Aditi cooked more than—simple food, nothing performative. Kabir washed dishes without being asked. They listened to music from his phone, playlists overlapping and diverging. Occasionally, he caught her humming to something he didn't recognise.

They spoke about ordinary things. Groceries. Maintenance issues. Which plant needed more light. She asked about flying but not in detail, respecting the parts he could not share. He asked about her work, her deadlines, her projects. She answered honestly, but selectively. There were stories she did not tell. Names that did not surface.

He told himself that was normal too.

Still, there were moments—brief, sharp—when the unease rose.

Once, while he was talking about a training simulator run, he noticed her gaze drift to the window, unfocused. He stopped mid-sentence. She blinked, startled, smiled quickly. "Sorry. Continue."

There were no arguments. No raised voices. No visible fractures. The house functioned. The marriage functioned. Friends from the station commented on how settled they seemed. How lucky. How well it all appeared to be fitting together.

Kabir accepted the praise with polite deflection. Aditi smiled.

But sometimes, late at night, when she thought he was asleep, she would sit up in bed, phone glowing briefly in her hands before she dimmed it again. Kabir never opened his eyes. He lay still, breathing slow and even, the way he had learned to in cockpits and bunk rooms and shared quarters across years.

He told himself not to look.

And yet, once, half-asleep, he caught the faintest thing—a soft exhale that sounded almost like relief. Or grief. He could not tell which.

The house continued to settle around them, absorbing their silences as easily as their laughter. The walls held warmth now. The cupboards no longer smelled of fresh wood. The plants began to lean toward the light they preferred.

From the outside, it was the shape of a life taking hold. From within, it felt—most days—like balance.

And on the days it didn't, Kabir did what he had always done. He trusted the structure. He trusted the routine. He trusted that whatever could not yet be named would resolve itself with time.

After all, time had a way of doing that. Or so he believed.

It came up casually.

They were clearing dinner, the sound of plates and running water filling the kitchen with domestic noise, when Aditi said it—almost as an aside.

"I'll be in Chandigarh next week."

Kabir looked up from the sink. "Chandigarh?"

"Yes. For work." She shrugged lightly, as if geography were incidental. "Just one day. Meetings."

He nodded. Of course. Chandigarh was reasonable. Close enough to be unremarkable. Her tone was neutral, practiced even. She didn't pause for his reaction. Didn't over-explain. Didn't add unnecessary detail.

"Which days?" he asked, wiping his hands on a towel.

"Tuesday. I'll take the early train on Tuesday morning."

"Okay," he said. The word landed easily. Too easily.

She glanced at him then, just briefly. As if checking something. As if measuring whether he needed more. When he said nothing else, she smiled, relieved—or perhaps simply efficient—and turned back to the counter.

They did not discuss it again.

He told himself there was nothing to discuss. Chandigarh was not foreign. Work trips were normal. Married people travelled. Adults did not interrogate logistics when trust existed. He believed her. He did not doubt the words themselves.

And yet—

That night, sleep came slower. Not because of suspicion. Not because of images or scenarios his mind constructed. It was something more primitive than thought. A tightening. A sense of ground shifting by a degree too small to register as movement but enough to unsettle balance.

He told himself he was tired. He had an early briefing. He rolled onto his side, faced her back, listened to her breathing until it steadied.

Morning arrived anyway.

The day she left was ordinary in every way that mattered and every way that did not.

She packed nothing. No fuss. She moved around the bedroom quietly, mindful of his uniform hanging ready, of the hour. She wore a simple kurta, hair tied back, face bare except for the faintest trace of kajal.

Kabir watched from the doorway as he buttoned his shirt.

She looked... composed. Not excited. Not reluctant. Just prepared.

He helped carry her bag to the car. Neither of them spoke much. The radio stayed off. The sky was pale, undecided. The road out of the station familiar enough that he barely noticed the turns.

At the drop-off point, she gathered her bag and the small water bottle. "I'll call once I reach," she said.

"Travel safe," he replied. He watched her walk away. That was the moment it hit him.

Not fear. Not anger. Something colder. Abandonment.

The word arrived uninvited, fully formed, and lodged itself beneath his ribs. Irrational, he knew immediately. Unfair. She was not leaving him. She was catching a train. She would be back in two days. He had survived far worse separations. Almost a year. Silences that stretched into months.

This was nothing.

And yet, as he stood there, watching her disappear into the moving crowd, he felt it—the unmistakable sensation of being left behind. Of watching something essential recede without knowing why it hurt this much.

He stayed longer than necessary. Long enough that the platform announcer repeated itself. Long enough that he had to consciously turn away.

Driving back through the station gates, the dread did not lift. It sat with him through the briefing. Through the sim run. Through the calm, exacting demands of the simulated cockpit where his body performed flawlessly even as something inside him stayed clenched.

He told himself, again and again, that he believed her.

And he did.

That was the most frightening part. Because belief did not quiet the ache. Because trust did not prevent the hollowing.

Because whatever this was had nothing to do with logic—and everything to do with a fear he had not realised was still alive.

By the time he returned home that evening, the house felt different. Not empty. Just... less held.

The clock ticked. The plants leaned toward the window. Her cushion remained in its place on the sofa, a shallow impression still visible where she had sat that morning.

Kabir stood in the doorway longer than he meant to. He told himself it would pass. It always did.

And yet, for the first time, he did not fully believe that either.

Chapter 27

Aditi saw Angad before she recognised him.

He was standing just outside the station exit, slightly to the side, as if unsure whether he belonged fully in the flow of arriving passengers. Chandigarh's afternoon light fell cleanly on him, sharp and unfiltered, revealing lines she did not remember—at the corners of his eyes, at the edge of his mouth. He looked older. Quieter, perhaps. But unmistakably himself.

The realisation came with a jolt. He had come all this way.

The thought pleased her more than she was prepared for. Not because of romance—she told herself that immediately, defensively—but because of effort. Because someone had rearranged their life, their time, their geography, to see her. The fact lodged itself in her chest like a small, glowing stone.

Angad saw her then. His face changed—not dramatically, not theatrically—but enough. His shoulders loosened. His mouth curved into a smile that felt private, reserved just for her.

“Aditi,” he said, as if the name had weight.

She walked toward him, aware suddenly of her body—of the swing of her bag, the fall of her kurti, the way she was smiling without having decided to.

“You actually came,” she said.

He shrugged lightly. “You sounded like you needed a break.”

It was said casually, but she heard the subtext. *I came because you asked. Because I could. Because I wanted to.*

The pleasure that spread through her was immediate—and immediately followed by guilt.

Kabir thought she was here for work. Not exactly a lie, she told herself. There were usually meetings. Emails. Deliverables. Not today though. The truth, standing in front of her now, rendered that justification thin. Insufficient. She was happy to see Angad. And that happiness felt like a betrayal precisely because it was uncomplicated.

They walked without deciding where to go, falling into step with the ease of people who had once memorised each other's rhythms. Chandigarh unfolded around them in clean lines and orderly intersections. Wide roads. Low buildings. A city that felt curated rather than chaotic.

"Still neat," Angad said, glancing around. "Like it's afraid of becoming messy." She smiled. "You always hated that."

"I hated that nothing ever spilled," he corrected. "Life should spill a little."

She almost laughed. The familiarity of the complaint struck her—how easily he slid back into old opinions, old postures, as if time had folded politely around him.

They chose a café near the plaza, one with outdoor seating and too much glass. The kind of place designed for conversation, not hiding. Aditi noticed, distantly, that she didn't mind being seen with him.

They talked freely.

About work, at first—surface-level exchanges that served as warm-up rather than substance. Then, inevitably, the past.

"It was... easy, wasn't it?" Angad said, stirring his coffee though he wasn't drinking it. "Back then." The word hovered between them. Easy.

Aditi nodded before she could stop herself. "It was."

And it had been. She could not deny that. The days had flowed into one another without the sharp edges she felt now. Without the constant self-awareness, the vigilance. There had been no fear of losing, because she had already given so much of herself away that there was nothing left to guard.

Only later had she understood the cost.

"It was easy because I didn't ask for much," she said carefully.

Angad looked at her, surprised—but not defensive. "You didn't *need* much."

She almost corrected him. Almost said *I needed plenty—you just didn't hear it*. But she let it pass. The conversation was fragile, and she was not ready to fracture it yet.

They spoke of drifting apart. Of how life had intruded quietly rather than violently. No singular betrayal. No dramatic ending. Just missed calls that stayed missed. Plans postponed until they dissolved. A slow recalibration of priorities that neither had named until it was already complete.

"I thought we had time," Angad said. "I really did."

"So did I," she replied.

And that, too, was true.

They walked again, the city opening into a fair-like stretch—vendors, colours, noise softened by distance. A man spun candy floss into clouds of pink and blue, the sugar catching the light.

Angad stopped. "Wait," he said.

She turned back, puzzled, watching him walk toward the cart. When he returned, he handed her a cone of candy floss, pink and impossibly light.

"You used to love these," he said. "Said they tasted like air pretending to be sweet."

The memory hit her with startling force. She laughed, genuinely this time. "I did say that."

"You made a whole theory about how liking candy floss said something about a person's optimism."

She took a bite. It dissolved instantly, leaving nothing but sweetness and stickiness. "I was younger," she said.

"You were happier." The statement landed softly—and sharply.

They sat on a low wall nearby, shoulders close but not touching. She was acutely aware of the space between them, of how easily it could be crossed. When Angad shifted, his fingers brushed against the back of her hand.

It was casual. Almost accidental. But her body reacted instantly.

A sharp awareness shot through her—heat, recognition, memory encoded in muscle rather than mind. Her breath caught, imperceptibly, but she felt it.

Angad did not withdraw. His fingers rested there, lightly, as if testing a boundary he pretended not to see.

Aditi's mind raced. This is how it used to begin, a voice inside her said. Not with declarations, but with proximity. With touch that felt inevitable rather than chosen.

She told herself she would not let it go further. Kabir doesn't deserve that, she thought. He doesn't deserve to be the collateral damage of my confusion.

She shifted slightly, just enough to create space. Angad noticed—but did not comment. His fingers withdrew, slowly.

They continued talking, but something had changed. The air between them felt charged now, dense with what was not being said.

Angad spoke, increasingly, with a sharpness she did not remember. Small remarks at first. "He sounds very... procedural," he said when she mentioned Kabir's schedule.

"Very organised," when she spoke of their routines.

"Predictable," when she described a plan they had made months in advance.

None of it overtly cruel. All of it edged.

"You sound bored," he said finally.

"I'm not," she replied immediately.

He smiled, faintly. "You sound like someone who learned to choose safety."

The comment irritated her, but she let it pass. She told herself it was old jealousy resurfacing. A familiar reflex. Something she had once known how to manage.

Evening fell. Aditi decided it was time to get back. The day had passed with a strange elasticity—both too fast and unbearably long.

As they walked toward the station, Angad's tone shifted almost imperceptibly—from reflective to faintly amused, as though the day had confirmed something he had suspected all along. "So," he said lightly, hands in his pockets, "does Kabir know you still like candy floss?"

Aditi glanced at him. "Why wouldn't he?"

Angad smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I don't know. He doesn't strike me as someone who notices small indulgences. Or remembers them years later."

She felt the jab then—soft, precise. "He remembers other things," she said. "Important things."

"Of course," Angad replied easily. "He would. He sounds... dependable."

The word landed oddly, stretched thin by tone.

"That's not an insult," Aditi said, sharper than she intended.

"I didn't say it was," Angad replied. "I just wonder if dependability is enough for you. It never used to be."

They stopped at a crossing. Traffic hummed past, orderly, indifferent.

"I was younger then," she said. "I needed chaos to feel alive."

"And now?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Now I need peace."

Angad laughed quietly. "Peace is underrated until you've had too much of it."

She turned to face him. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Reducing him," she said. "You've been doing it all day."

He looked momentarily surprised—then unbothered. "I'm not reducing him. I just don't think he knows you the way I did."

"That doesn't make you right," she said.

"No," he agreed. "But are you standing up for him, Aditi?"

The truth startled her more than his barbs would have.

"You talk about him like he's a system you've enrolled in," Angad continued, his voice low now. "Processes. Routines. Planning six months ahead. That's not love, Aditi. That's management."

"That's partnership," she countered. "It's showing up."

"For duty," he said. "Not desire."

She felt irritation flare. "You don't get to decide what my marriage is."

"I don't," he said calmly. "But I know you. And I know what dims you."

The certainty in his voice unsettled her—not because it was entirely false, but because it wasn't entirely true either.

"You confuse intensity with intimacy," she said. "You always have."

"And you confuse safety with fulfillment," he shot back.

They walked the last stretch in silence, the air between them taut. At the station entrance, Angad slowed. "You know," he said, softer now, "he'll never hate me the way I hate him."

Aditi frowned. "Why would you hate him?"

"Because he has what I lost," Angad said. "And because he doesn't even seem to know what he's holding."

"That's unfair," she said quietly.

"Is it?" He looked at her then, really looked. "You had to lie to him to come here. And you're rushing to get back."

The words struck deep.

She opened her mouth, then closed it.

"That's not nothing," he continued gently. "People don't lie or rush back for boredom. They lie for desire."

She shook her head. "I didn't lie for you."

"But you didn't tell the truth either," he said.

On the platform, the announcement echoed. Her train was arriving.

They stood facing each other, the day collapsing inward, all its warmth and nostalgia suddenly brittle.

"You'll come to Delhi," Angad said again, not quite a question

She hesitated only a moment. "Soon."

The word felt noncommittal enough to be safe. He nodded, satisfied. Suddenly, he leaned in, kissed her cheek—brief, careful. Her skin tingled long

after he stepped back. Then, with deliberate casualness, he added, “Just don’t let him turn you into someone who mistakes calm for happiness.”

On the train, as it pulled away, she watched him recede into the platform crowd, standing still, hands in pockets, eyes fixed on her window.

She lifted her hand in farewell. Her phone buzzed—a message from him already.
Text me when you reach.

She sat back, heart unsteady, telling herself that his barbs about Kabir meant nothing. That they were just echoes of an old insecurity. That she knew better now.

Outside, the station disappeared. Inside, Aditi stared at her reflection in the darkened glass and wondered—not for the first time—how easily the past still knew the way back to her.

Chapter 28

She returned home late that night.

The house was lit. Kabir was in the living room, standing on a stool, fixing a light fixture she had mentioned once in passing. He had changed into comfortable clothes. A glass of whisky sat on the coffee table, untouched, catching the light.

The scene stopped her. Something about it—its ordinariness, its familiarity—broke her heart.

This was home. This was the life she had chosen.

Kabir looked up when he heard the door. “You’re back.”

“Yes.”

“How was Chandigarh?”

“Good.”

He nodded, accepting the word at face value. He stepped down, wiped his hands, gestured toward the light. “It works now.”

She smiled. “It’s perfect.”

And for a moment—for a dangerous, fleeting moment—she felt the full weight of what she was doing.

Then the familiar cadence returned. The internal justifications. The quiet divisions. The belief that feelings did not equal action, that love could be compartmentalised, that she was still good.

Kabir watched the way her fingers massaged her skin. He felt a surge of protectiveness, followed immediately by a sharp, jagged needle of jealousy—jealousy of anything that occupied the space in her mind where he used to live.

She walked past him to the fridge, poured herself water. She drank it slowly, letting the cold fill her. Kabir watched the way her throat bobbed when she swallowed. He reached out, his hand acting on an impulse he could no longer throttle. His fingers brushed her sleeve, then found the warm skin of her forearm. Aditi stopped. She didn't pull away, but she didn't lean in either. She stood there, halfway between the door and the bed, her mind clearly still elsewhere..

"Aditi," he whispered.

She turned her head, her gaze slightly unfocused. "Hmm? Did you say something, Kabir?"

The casualness of it, the sheer mundane "ordinariness" of her tone while he was vibrating with months' worth of repressed longing, was the final break in the dam.

Before Aditi's hand could fully leave his arm, Kabir's eyes fixed on her mouth. The restraint he had cultivated for months didn't just snap; it disintegrated. He grabbed her arm and, with a silent, blinding speed that left her gasping, he pulled her into the hard plane of his chest and crushed his mouth against hers.

This wasn't a worshipful kiss of tenderness. It was possessive, demanding—a scorching claim laid after a long exile. He didn't wait for her to catch her breath; he drank the startled gasp right out of her lungs.

Aditi's hands flew up to his shoulders, her fingers fluttering against the cotton of his T-shirt. She was overwhelmed, her mind struggling to pivot from the cold logic of her day to the sudden, violent heat of Kabir's body. She felt the world tilt as he dragged her across the bed, his movements fueled by a desperate, animal urgency.

He took her back to the bed, the mattress dipping beneath their combined weight. The thin fabric of her nightclothes was no barrier at all against the shocking inferno of his skin. Kabir was everywhere—his hands framing her face, his knees forcing hers apart, his heart hammering a frantic, tribal rhythm against her breast.

"God, I want you," he rasped against her lips, his voice raw and unrecognizable. "You have no damn idea how much. I'm dying, Aditi."

He buried his face in the curve of her neck, his breath hot and ragged. The rough graze of his stubble was an exquisite foil to the softness of her skin, a friction that finally started to pull her back from her distant thoughts.

Aditi's eyes fluttered shut. The phone, the distance—it began to blur, receding into the background as Kabir's intensity demanded her full attention. Yet, there was still a lag. Her movements were fluid but slow, her responses like someone waking up from a long, deep sleep while he was already at a fever pitch.

She wrapped her arms around his waist, anchoring herself to the storm. Kabir groaned at the touch, the sound vibrating through her chest. He was caging her, an inescapable prison of muscle and heat, his fingers plunging through her hair as he tilted her head back to devour her mouth again.

The kiss was a desperate collision. Kabir was seeking a version of her that he'd missed for months, trying to find her through the sheer force of his touch. He slid his hands low, his palms searing her skin, cupping her thighs and hoisting her higher on the pillows as if her weight were nothing.

Aditi's legs parted instinctively, a welcome opening that he claimed immediately. He plunged back into her mouth, his tongue demanding a surrender she was only just beginning to process. She reached for the hem of his T-shirt, her fingers fumbling slightly before she managed to claw it up over his head. Her palms flattened against the lean, hot muscle of his torso, and the physical reality of him finally began to burn away the last of her mental fog.

"Is this real?" she whispered into his skin, her voice a fragile contrast to his growl.

Kabir didn't answer with words. He pulled her clothes free, the fabric fluttering away like an afterthought. His mouth followed the trail of exposed skin—a searing line of kisses across her shoulders and the vulnerable curve of her throat.

He framed her face again, his thumbs tracing her cheekbones with a sensual challenge. He was looking for her, searching her eyes for the spark that matched his own. When his thumb came to rest on her bottom lip, Aditi finally

took the bait. She caught it between her teeth, a bold move that drew a look of pure, hungry adoration from him.

"Tell me, Aditi," he growled, his forehead resting against hers, his breath hitching. "Tell me what you want me to do to you."

It was an order cloaked as an inquiry. He was giving her the power, but his body was trembling with the effort of not taking it anyway.

Aditi looked up at him, her eyes finally darkening with a reflected glow. She was no longer elsewhere. She was here, in the amber light, trapped beneath the man who had waited for her in the silence.

"Everything," she breathed. "I want everything."

Her answer was the catalyst for a slow, deep, passion-drenched surrender. Kabir's hands began an exploration that was both a re-discovery and a conquest. He traced the curve of her breast, his fingers moving with a skilled, thrilling precision that made her writhe beneath him.

He pushed her back until she was bracing herself on her elbows, her hair a wild halo against the pillows. In the next heartbeat, the last flimsy barrier was gone. He kept one hand anchored to her, a tether to reality, while he lowered his head to trace a scorching downward trail.

Aditi gasped, her breath catching in a broken moan. She watched him, her gaze locked on the top of his head, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm. His stubble sent sharp, pleasant shivers racing down her spine, forcing her to finally, fully let go of her mind.

When he looked up at her, seeking that final, undeniable permission, she didn't hesitate. She pulled his head back up to hers, her kiss open-mouthed and searing, her hands finding the buttons of his pants.

They fell away, and finally, there was nothing left but the two of them and the months of accumulated longing. He lifted her easily, settling her against him, their fingers twining together as he began a patient, thrilling torture.

He tasted every inch of her, bringing her to the brink and then backing away, over and over, until Aditi was the one begging, her voice a soft plea against his ear. The tension was a physical pain, a beautiful agony that Kabir seemed determined to savor until they both reached the absolute limit of endurance.

When they finally became one, it was a single, relentless rhythm. The world outside the bedroom—the base, the planes flying overhead, the distance of the past few months—ceased to exist. There was only the shattering, simultaneous release, a crashing relief that left them both spent and gasping.

Kabir collapsed beside her, but even in his exhaustion, he didn't let go. He pulled her close, tucking her head under his chin into the haven of his arms.

Aditi lay there, her heart slowly returning to a normal pace. She traced a hand across his damp hair. Kabir leaned into the touch, his eyes falling closed.

He was wholly and completely satisfied, not just by the act, but by the quiet certainty that they could be themselves again.

The fortress had fallen.

But even as sleep threatened to claim them, Kabir shifted. He looked at her, seeing the way her eyes were now fully present, fully his. He captured her mouth again—not with the tentative touch of the evening's start, but with a desperate, animal urgency that tore down the last of his mental defenses. He didn't just want her for the night; he wanted to make sure she never went back to that distant place again. Or took another's man's name.

And this time, when he kissed her, Aditi didn't just receive it. She met him halfway, her mind finally, blissfully quiet.

Kabir's eyes flew open in the darkness. The room was still warm from them.

Not with the careless warmth of habit, but with something far more tentative—the warmth that followed an act undertaken with memory, fear, and deliberate choice. The sheets were faintly rumpled, the bedside lamp casting a low, forgiving light that softened edges without erasing them. Outside, the station lay hushed in its regimented sleep, the cantonment quiet as if even the night understood restraint.

Aditi lay on her back, one arm flung loosely above her head, her breath steadying faster than Kabir's. Her body had responded easily to Kabir's—almost instinctively. She had welcomed him without hesitation, kissed him back, murmured his name at the right moments. It had been familiar, almost seamless.

When he had reached for her, tentatively, she had come to him at once. No hesitation. No surprise. As if she had been waiting, perfectly still, for his permission.

She had made it easy.

Too easy.

Now, lying beside her, the shock of what he had felt during lovemaking settled slowly into him, heavy and undeniable.

Physically, nothing had been wrong. Her body had responded as it had before—open, warm, generous. She had arched into him instinctively, kissed him back with intensity, whispered his name. There had been no awkwardness, no reminder of the months of distance.

But emotionally—

Emotionally, she had not been there.

He had felt it almost immediately. The absence had been subtle, not dramatic enough to stop him, but sharp enough to register. Her eyes had not quite held his. When they had met, they had seemed unfocused, as though she were looking through him rather than at him. Her hands had held him without the grounding pressure he remembered—the unspoken *I am here* that used to pass between them so effortlessly.

It stunned him. It was like stepping into a familiar house and realising the furniture had been rearranged in the dark.

Chapter 29

Kabir did not plan to ask.

That was the first thing he realised, standing in the kitchen that evening, watching Aditi rinse rice under the tap with the careful concentration she brought to everything now. He had come home later than usual—not late enough to worry, just late enough to disturb the shape of the evening. The house smelled faintly of ginger and cumin. Something simmered on the stove. The window was open.

Normal. Too normal.

He leaned against the counter, helmet bag still slung over one shoulder, and waited for the feeling to pass. It had been there for weeks—low, persistent, unnameable. Not suspicion exactly. Suspicion implied evidence. This was more like imbalance. Like flying with a trim slightly off—nothing dramatic, nothing unsafe, just enough to demand constant correction.

Aditi did not look at him immediately.

“Hi,” she said, eventually, glancing over her shoulder. “You’re back early.”

“Weather,” he replied.

She nodded, as if filing the information away. Her hair was tied up loosely, wisps escaping near her temples. She wore one of his old t-shirts, sleeves rolled once without thinking. It struck him, absurdly, that he could list the things that had changed about her—posture, cadence, silences—but not name, the thing that mattered.

He set his bag down.

“Anything urgent?” she asked, still focused on the rice.

“No.”

“Okay. Dinner will take ten minutes.”

“Take your time.”

She turned the flame down slightly, placed the rinsed rice into the cooker, wiped her hands on a cloth. Still no eye contact. It shouldn’t have mattered. It never used to. But now—everything seemed to carry weight.

Kabir moved to the bar, poured himself whisky. He drank it slowly, letting the heat wash over him. He told himself—again—that this was nothing. Adjustment. Fatigue. The aftershocks of building a life from scratch.

But the feeling did not recede.

They ate at the small dining table they had bought last month. The chairs still felt slightly stiff, unused to bodies. The light fixture Kabir had installed cast a warm, steady glow. Aditi talked about work—projects, deadlines, something that irritated her mildly. Kabir listened, responded where appropriate, nodded, smiled once when she made a wry comment.

He could play this role.

He had been trained to.

After dinner, she cleared the plates. He washed them. Their movements were coordinated without discussion, like muscle memory refusing to forget itself. The water ran. Plates clinked softly. The world remained intact.

It was when she reached for her phone—casually, reflexively—that something inside him finally tipped.

The vibration was brief. Almost apologetic. She glanced at the screen. And smiled.

Not broadly. Not consciously. Just the faint softening at the edges of her mouth that came when something pleased her unexpectedly. It was gone in a second.

But Kabir had already seen it.

He did not react. He dried his hands carefully, folded the cloth, hung it back in its place. His movements remained precise. Controlled. But inside him, the pressure sharpened, coalesced into something that demanded air.

They moved to the living room. Aditi sat on her usual corner of the sofa, pulling her legs up beneath her. Kabir took the chair opposite, posture relaxed, gaze steady.

The television murmured in the background. Some news panel. He did not register the content. He watched her instead.

She scrolled absently, paused, typed a short reply, set the phone aside face down. She did not look at him.

The question arrived then. Not as words. As necessity.

Kabir inhaled slowly. "Aditi."

She looked up. "Yes?"

The house seemed to still.

He did not know how to begin. Accusation would be easy. Fear was harder. "There's something I need to ask you," he said.

Her shoulders tensed. Not visibly. Not dramatically. But enough. "Okay."

He waited. She waited.

He chose the truth—not the sharpest one, but the most accurate. "I feel like I'm losing you," he said. "While you're standing right here."

Silence.

The television continued to talk, oblivious.

Aditi did not respond immediately. Her hands tightened slightly in the fabric of the cushion beneath them. She looked at the floor. Then at him.

Kabir held her gaze, unflinching.

"I don't know when it started," he continued, carefully. "Or if it's something I imagined. But something feels... off. And I can't tell if it's me. Or us."

She swallowed.

He pressed on—not aggressively, but because stopping now would break him.

"You're here," he said. "You do everything. You're present. Last night did happen. And yet—" He paused, searching. "It feels like you're holding something back. Or somewhere else. I need to know if that's true."

Aditi closed her eyes.

That was the moment Kabir knew. Not the words—there were none yet. But the way her face rearranged itself, as though bracing for impact.

She opened her eyes again. “Yes,” she said quietly.

The word landed without sound.

Kabir did not move.

“Yes,” she repeated, as if anchoring herself to it. “Something is... different.”

His throat tightened. “Why?” he asked.

Another pause. Longer this time.

She did not rush. That, too, told him something. “There’s someone,” she said.

Kabir exhaled slowly, deliberately, as if through a checklist. “Someone from work?”

“No.”

A beat.

“From before?”

“Yes.”

The room felt suddenly smaller. He did not ask the obvious question first. That was discipline. That was survival.

“Have you—” He stopped. Reset. “Have you been with him?”

“No.”

The answer came quickly. Too quickly to be calculated.

“I haven’t,” she said. “Not physically.”

Kabir nodded once. “That wasn’t what I was afraid of,” he said, surprising both of them.

Her eyes flickered. “Then what?”

“That you might be somewhere I can’t reach.”

Her breath hitched.

She looked away, then back at him, eyes shining now, though tears did not fall. "I didn't mean for this to happen," she said. "I didn't plan it. I thought—once we moved, once things settled—it would go away."

"But it didn't."

"No."

"Why him?"

She hesitated. Not because she didn't know—but because the answer would hurt. "With him," she said slowly, "I don't feel watched by the future."

Kabir absorbed that.

"With you," she went on, voice trembling now, "everything matters. Every choice feels like it has weight. With him, it feels—lighter."

The word struck deeper than accusation ever could.

Kabir leaned back slightly, as if physically accommodating the blow. "Do you love him?" he asked.

She took a few seconds to think. "I think so."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation there.

The contradiction sat between them, enormous and impossible.

Kabir closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, something had shifted. "Then this can't continue," he said.

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"And yet?"

Silence. She did not answer. Because there was no answer that did not indict her.

Kabir stood.

The movement was sudden enough that she flinched.

He took a step away, then another, pacing once along the length of the room. His hands clenched and unclenched.

When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. Too quiet.

"I can live with a lot of things," he said. "Distance. Stress. Time apart. What I can't live with is not knowing where I stand in my own marriage."

She rose too, instinctively. "Kabir—"

"No." He held up a hand. "Please don't." He turned to face her.

"This—" He gestured vaguely, encompassing the room, the house, the life they were assembling. "This only works if we're in it fully. I can't compete with a version of you that exists somewhere else."

"I'm trying," she said, desperation breaking through at last. "I swear I am."

"I know," he said. That was the cruelest part. He *did* know. He walked past her then, toward the bedroom.

She followed a few steps, then stopped. "Kabir," she said, voice cracking. "I don't want to lose you."

He paused at the doorway, back to her. "I already feel like I have," he said. He went inside and closed the door gently behind him.

That night, Kabir slept on the sofa. Not dramatically. Not as punishment. Because lying beside her felt unbearable.

The house did not echo. But it no longer breathed easily either.

Something essential had been named. And nothing, Kabir knew, would ever be the same again.

Kabir lay on his back, arms folded loosely over his chest, eyes open to the dark. The ceiling fan made a low, rhythmic sound, steady as breath. He focused on it, the way he did during long sorties—pick a constant, let the rest fade.

It didn't work.

Images kept intruding, uninvited. Aditi's smile at her phone. The way she had said *lighter*, as though weight were something he had imposed on her simply by loving her fully.

He turned onto his side, then back again. Sleep did not come.

After a long while—minutes, maybe hours—he heard the bedroom door open.

He did not turn.

She stood there, uncertain, barefoot, wrapped in the thin cotton shawl she wore when she was cold or afraid. The light from the bedroom fell across the floor, stopping just short of him.

“Kabir,” she said softly.

No response.

She sat down on the edge of the sofa, hands clasped so tightly her knuckles whitened. For a moment, she simply breathed. Then—“Please don’t shut me out.”

That did it.

He rolled onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow, looking at her properly now. Her eyes were red. Her face stripped of composure. Not dramatic. Just exposed.

“I’m not shutting you out,” he said. “I’m trying not to say something I can’t take back.”

She nodded, tears slipping free now. “I deserve whatever you say.”

He studied her for a long moment. Then, quietly said, “Why him?”

The question landed differently this time. Less raw, more deliberate.

She didn’t answer immediately.

“No,” he said, when she hesitated. “Not the abstract version. Not *lighter* or *easier*. I want to know—why Angad and not me?”

Her breath stuttered.

“You were there,” he continued. “I wasn’t absent. I didn’t disappear. I stayed away when duty demanded it, but I never left you. Not once. Everything I did, every flight—I came back to you in my head. You were the constant.”

His voice thickened, just slightly. “I loved you every day,” he said. “Every version of you. Even the difficult ones. Especially those. So tell me—what did he have that I didn’t?”

She shook her head helplessly. “It’s not about having,” she whispered.

“That’s not an answer.”

Her shoulders slumped.

“With him,” she said, tears spilling freely now, “I don’t feel like I’m being measured against the rest of my life. With you, everything feels permanent. Immense. I’m terrified of failing you.”

The words hurt more than anger would have.

“So you chose someone who didn’t require you to be brave,” he said.

She flinched. “I didn’t choose him,” she said. “I swear I didn’t. It just... happened.”

Kabir let out a soft, humorless breath. “Things don’t just happen to people who are paying attention.”

Silence stretched between them, taut.

“I never stopped choosing you,” he said finally. “Even when it was hard. Even when you were away. Even when we were both tired and everything felt fragile. I never looked for escape.”

She covered her face with her hands. “I know,” she sobbed. “That’s what makes this unforgivable.”

He sat up slowly, cross-legged now, level with her. “Look at me,” he said.

She did.

“I need to know something,” he said. “If I ask you to end it—completely, permanently—can you?”

Her mouth opened. Closed.

That pause was everything.

Kabir nodded once, as if confirming something he had already understood. “Okay,” he said softly.

“What does that mean?” she asked, panic creeping into her voice.

“It means I can’t beg for presence,” he said. “Or negotiate for honesty. Or live in a marriage where I’m the responsible choice but not the desired one.”

“I love you,” she said desperately. “I do. Just—”

"No," he said gently. "Don't dilute it. If you have to qualify it, it's not what I need."

He stood then, the movement calm, decisive.

"So this is it?" she asked, voice barely audible.

He hesitated. That hesitation mattered. "I don't know," he said truthfully. "But I know I can't keep living like this. I won't compete with someone who exists, because I loved you seriously."

Her chest hitched. "I don't want to lose you," she whispered again.

Kabir looked at her—really looked—taking in the woman he had built his future around. "I loved you without reservation," he said. "If that wasn't enough—then we're already standing at the edge of something broken."

He picked up his blanket from the sofa. "I'm not done," he said quietly. "But I'm not in either." He lay back down, turning away from her.

Aditi remained on the sofa, frozen, the distance between them suddenly wider than any posting, any separation duty had ever imposed.

The light stayed on. Neither of them reached for it.

And somewhere, in the stillness of the house, the life they had been building together held its breath—unsure whether it would be abandoned, or asked to survive something it might not.

Chapter 30

When Aditi came out of the bathroom, steam still clinging faintly to her skin, she saw Kabir sitting at the edge of the bed.

He was exactly where she had left him.

Forearms resting on his thighs. Fingers loosely interlaced, as though he had once begun a prayer and then forgotten the words. His shoulders were straight, his posture controlled, but something in the set of his back told her he had not moved since she'd gone in. Not to pace. Not to lie down. Not even to stretch.

He had been waiting.

The sight of him struck her harder than anything that had come before—harder than the confession of last night itself, harder than the dread that had pooled in her stomach since she'd first admitted, haltingly, that Angad was back in her life. Kabir looked contained, almost calm, but there was an unmistakable rigidity to him now, like a fault line sealed just tightly enough to hold.

He did not turn when he heard her.

His gaze was fixed somewhere ahead—on the wardrobe mirror, on the pale rectangle of wall beyond it, on nothing she could name. It was the look of someone staring through something rather than at it.

She wrapped her towel tighter around herself, suddenly conscious of her bare arms, her damp hair. It felt obscene, standing there unclothed, vulnerable in ways that no longer felt like intimacy. She waited for him to speak, for the moment to move forward, because standing still felt unbearable.

“When were you going to tell me?” Kabir asked.

There was no edge to his voice. No tremor. It was the tone he used when checking the weather forecast, when asking if she wanted tea. Familiar. Domestic. Almost gentle. That familiarity hurt more than if he had raised his voice.

"I don't know," she said. Her voice sounded thin to her own ears. "I just didn't want—"

She stopped herself. Anything she added now would sound like justification. Defence. Explanation. And in the presence of his stillness, defence felt grotesque, like arguing against gravity.

Kabir nodded once, very slightly, as if acknowledging a logistical detail rather than a confession capable of changing the shape of his life.

He turned then. Not sharply. Not dramatically. Just enough to look at her.

The pain in his eyes was immediate and unmistakable, and it startled her more than rage ever could have. It wasn't flaring or volatile. There was no accusation in it, no demand for reassurance. It was deep, contained, almost dignified—the look of a man who had already absorbed the worst and was now standing inside it, steadying himself so it would not spill outward.

It was the kind of pain that had already decided not to beg.

Aditi felt her chest tighten, her breath catching in a way that had nothing to do with guilt and everything to do with recognition. She had seen Kabir wounded before—in moments of grief, in stories he told reluctantly about losing friends—but never like this. Never with this particular stillness, this refusal to reach for anything that might soften the blow.

"I need to be very clear about something," he said quietly. "So there's no confusion later."

The phrase landed like a quiet threat—not because of what it promised, but because of what it assumed. That there would be a later. That this moment would divide things into before and after. Her chest tightened further. She nodded, afraid that if she spoke, she might unravel.

"I don't share," he continued. "Not bodies. Not hearts. Not attention."

The words were simple, almost stark. There was no moralising in them, no sermon. Just a boundary, named cleanly and without apology.

She opened her mouth instinctively, but he lifted a hand—not to silence her, not sharply or impatiently, just enough to slow the moment down, to keep it from rushing into chaos.

“I know you haven’t slept with him,” he said. “I believe you.”

For a brief, shameful second, relief flickered through her. It was involuntary, reflexive, and it died the moment it was born.

“But betrayal doesn’t begin with beds,” he went on. “It begins with permission. With deciding someone else still gets access to parts of you that were meant to be ours.”

The words landed not as accusation, but as truth. Unadorned. Unforgiving. They did not leave her room to argue with them.

She felt exposed in a way that had nothing to do with the towel slipping slightly at her back. This was exposure of another kind—the realisation that something she had told herself was harmless, manageable, had in fact already crossed a line she could not redraw.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen,” she said again, her voice breaking despite her effort to keep it steady. “It just... did.”

A single breath, measured and controlled, as though he were managing a physical reaction rather than an emotional one.

“Things don’t just happen,” he said. “They are allowed.”

The sentence fell between them, heavy and complete. Silence followed. Dense. Unavoidable. It pressed against her ears, against her chest, until she could hear her own pulse. She realised, distantly, that she was shaking. Not dramatically—just a faint tremor running through her arms, her legs. She had the irrational urge to sit down, to anchor herself to something solid, but she stayed where she was, rooted by the weight of what she had already lost without fully understanding how.

Kabir stood up then. There was no aggression in the movement. No sharpness. He rose as if he had simply decided it was time to change position. But the effect was immediate and profound.

The mattress dipped, then stilled. And in that stillness, she became acutely aware of the distance between them—not dramatic, not exaggerated. Just exact. A few feet. An ocean.

He did not move closer. Did not reach for her. The absence of that instinct—so ingrained, so familiar—felt like a physical blow.

“Do you love him? I am asking again.” The question was not sharp. It carried no accusation, no desperation. It was almost weary, as though he were asking because not asking would be dishonest, not because he expected comfort from the answer.

Aditi swallowed. “I don’t know,” she whispered. It was the only truthful thing she could say, and it felt insufficient in the face of what it cost him.

Kabir closed his eyes. Not in defeat. Not in anger. In restraint.

She saw it then—the effort it took, the discipline required to remain this controlled when everything in him must have been screaming. She understood, dimly, that he was choosing his response with the same precision he brought to everything else in his life. That this calm was not absence of feeling, but mastery over it.

When he opened them again, something had shifted. Not anger. Resolution. “Love doesn’t survive this,” he said. “Not for me.”

The words were plain. Final. There was no threat attached to them, no attempt to frighten her into compliance. He was not saying this to make her choose him. He was stating a truth about himself, as immutable as bone.

She stared at him, panic blooming now, sharp and sudden. “Are you saying—”
“I’m saying,” he interrupted gently, “that I cannot stay whole in a marriage where I am an option.”

The word option echoed inside her, ugly and accurate. Her throat burned. Tears gathered, uninvited and unhelpful. “I chose you,” she said. “I married you.”

“Yes,” he said. “And that choice has to be made every day. Especially when it’s inconvenient.”

He turned away from her and walked toward the window. His back to her felt like a wall.

Outside, the sunshine was steady and indifferent, milkmen came, someone jogged by. Life continued. Duty uninterrupted. The sight of it made her chest ache. The world was not pausing for them. Nothing was.

“I won’t shout,” he said. “I won’t interrogate your phone. I won’t compete with him.” A pause. “But I will step back.”

The words landed with terrifying clarity. She felt panic surge, hot and immediate. This was not what she had imagined. She had braced herself for anger, for ultimatums, for emotional chaos she could at least respond to. This—this quiet withdrawal—left her nowhere to push against.

“Kabir, please,” she said, the plea escaping before she could stop it. “Don’t do this. Don’t walk away.”

He turned again, slower this time. “This isn’t punishment,” he said. “It’s self-respect.”

The word struck her like a blow. Self-respect. She realised then that he was not trying to hurt her. He was trying not to destroy himself.

“I love you,” he added, and this time his voice did falter—just slightly, a fracture she felt more than heard. “But love doesn’t mean erasing my own boundaries so someone else can feel less uncomfortable.”

The honesty of it undid her.

He moved past her toward the door of the adjoining room. The simple fact of him leaving—not the house, not the marriage, just the shared space—felt suddenly unbearable.

She reached out instinctively, fingers brushing the sleeve of his shirt. He stopped. Looked down at her hand.

For a moment—just one—she thought he might take it. That he might pull her into him despite everything, that habit and love might override principle.

Instead, gently—almost tenderly—he lifted her hand away.

That was the moment something inside her fractured. Not when he spoke. Not when he named betrayal. But when he chose distance without cruelty. When he denied himself as much as he denied her.

“I need time,” he said. “And you need to decide what you’re doing with your heart. Until then... this is where I stand.”

He stepped out for his run, closing the door softly behind him.

No slam. No finality. Just the quiet, devastating sound of restraint.

Aditi sank onto the bed, the towel finally slipping as she curled inward, shaking now in earnest. Her body folded in on itself, as though trying to protect a core that felt suddenly exposed to the elements.

She had expected fury. What she hadn't expected was the unbearable weight of a man who loved her enough to walk away before he became someone he despised.

And as she lay there, the room too quiet, the air too still, she understood—too late—that the most dangerous line she had crossed was not Angad's.

It was Kabir's.

Chapter 31

Kabir woke before the alarm.

That, too, was control.

The room was dark, suspended in that thin, unclaimed hour before morning committed itself to shape. He lay still on the bed, eyes open, staring at the ceiling above him. The mattress creaked faintly when Aditi shifted in her sleep.

The sound moved through him like a small, precise injury.

He did not turn toward her.

He focused instead on his breathing. In. Out. Counted. Regulated. The way he had learned years ago, when sleep came in fragments and adrenaline overstayed its welcome. When rest was something you managed rather than received.

By the time the alarm buzzed, he was already upright. He dressed quietly, movements economical, deliberate. PT clothes. Running shoes. Watch strapped tight enough to feel – not uncomfortable, just present. He did not look at the bed. He did not allow his eyes to go there, to the shape of her body beneath the covers, to the life that continued inches away without him.

Outside, the air was sharp. He ran longer than usual. The station roads were empty at that hour, streetlights still burning though the sky had begun its slow, reluctant lightening. His stride settled quickly into rhythm. Each breath measured. Each footfall landed cleanly.

He pushed. Not recklessly — not in a way that invited injury — but insistently. The familiar burn in his calves spread upward, steady and reassuring. Pain that followed rules. Pain that responded to effort and stopped when told to.

That was the difference.

When he returned, sweat-soaked and silent, the house was awake.

Aditi was in the kitchen, hair loose, already dressed. She looked up when he entered, hesitated for half a second too long, then smiled — tentative, careful. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” The word came out neutral. Controlled.

She poured him tea without asking. Set the cup down near the edge of the counter, as she always did. Their choreography remained intact, even if its meaning had shifted.

They did not discuss the night. They did not discuss anything that mattered.

Kabir left early.

At the squadron, the day snapped into place with merciless efficiency. The briefing room smelled faintly of stale coffee and whiteboard markers. The duty officer had already updated the board — weather, sorties, maintenance notes. Kabir took his seat, posture relaxed, expression unreadable.

He listened. He always listened.

A younger pilot stumbled slightly during a procedural rundown, corrected himself, glanced instinctively toward Kabir. Kabir met his eyes briefly and nodded once.

Enough.

Flying began mid-morning. The aircraft responded the way it always did — with precision. Checks were routine. Systems clean. Kabir moved through the checklist with the same calm thoroughness he now applied to everything.

Once airborne, the world simplified. Altitude. Airspeed. Heading.

The cockpit was a closed universe. No phones. No conversations he could not end. No emotional negotiations. The logic was pure. Input, response. Cause, effect.

He flew flawlessly. Not aggressively. Not showily. Just clean, disciplined lines through the sky. The kind of flying that inspired confidence rather than awe. The kind that made juniors quietly adjust their own standards upward.

On landing, his debrief was exacting. He did not raise his voice. He did not criticise unnecessarily. But he noticed everything — a hesitation here, a delayed response there. He asked questions that required thought, not defence.

Afterwards, paperwork. He completed it himself. That, too, was control.

At home, the silence thickened. Kabir came back each evening to a house that was functional, warm, increasingly beautiful. Aditi had rearranged the shelves. New cushions appeared on the sofa. The plant by the window had grown noticeably.

He noticed everything. He commented on nothing.

They ate together. They spoke about logistics. Groceries. Schedules. What needed fixing. He did not touch her. Not accidentally. Not intentionally. Not even in those passing, unconscious ways — brushing past in a hallway, a hand at the small of her back.

That was control too.

Aditi noticed. Of course she did.

The first time she reached for him — casually, almost without thought — his body stilled under her hand. Not recoiling. Not rejecting. Just unavailable.

She withdrew immediately, apology flickering across her face. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

They left it there.

Kabir increased his workouts. Morning runs lengthened. Evening strength sessions became routine. He added weights. Added reps. Pushed through the stiffness in his neck with deliberate disregard.

Pain was manageable. Emotion was not.

At night, he slept lightly.

Sometimes on the sofa. Occasionally on the bed when exhaustion overrode resolve — but always at the very edge, body angled away, as if proximity itself were dangerous.

He dreamed less. Or perhaps he remembered less. Either way, he preferred it.

At work, his reputation sharpened.

He took on extra responsibilities without being asked. Covered for a colleague dealing with a family emergency. Stayed late to review maintenance logs. Mentored a junior officer through a difficult evaluation without condescension or indulgence.

Command noticed. So did everyone else. “Sir doesn’t miss a thing,” someone said once, not realising Kabir could hear. Kabir pretended he hadn’t.

Flying did not always mean the sky. Some days it meant simulators.

The darkened sim bay smelled faintly of plastic and recycled air. Kabir strapped in with the same care he gave the real aircraft. Muscle memory did not differentiate between metal and projection. Switches. Checks. Callouts.

The instructor pushed weather harder than usual — unexpected turbulence, a late system fault layered over a busy recovery. Kabir absorbed it without visible reaction. Adjusted power. Corrected attitude. Flew through the problem as if it had been expected all along.

Afterward, the younger pilots clustered around the console, replaying segments. “How did you know it was going to cascade like that, sir?” one of them asked.

Kabir paused. “I didn’t. I just assumed it would.”

They laughed, a little nervously.

He did not.

Later that week, a sortie was scrubbed after engine start.

A minor warning. Nothing dramatic. Procedure was procedure. Kabir shut down without argument, logged the fault, walked back to the crew room while another pilot took his slot.

Years ago, it would have irritated him. Now, it barely registered.

Loss of control annoyed him less than uncertainty.

When he did fly, conditions were often unremarkable. High haze. Mild crosswinds. Routine airspace. Those were the days he liked best.

Flying did not need to be exceptional to be absorbing. Holding parameters. Maintaining spacing. Discipline without spectacle.

On one sortie, a junior wingman drifted slightly wide during a turn. Nothing unsafe. Kabir noticed.

During debrief, he brought it up gently. Explained scan saturation. Awareness narrowing before pilots realised it. He did not mention that he had once made the same error under much heavier pressure. That memory belonged to another version of him.

The stiffness in his neck worsened. Sustained G left a dull ache that lingered into evenings. He stretched methodically. Rolled his shoulders before sleep. Told no one.

It wasn't pain that worried him. It was distraction.

On one landing, the crosswind kicked unexpectedly just before flare. Kabir corrected instinctively — rudder pressure precise, hands steady. Clean touchdown.

Later, filling out the report, he noticed his fingers trembling faintly. He stilled them against the table until they obeyed.

At home, Aditi watched him retreat into that competence. That narrowing.

She tried — tentatively — to reach him. A comment about his run. A question about his day. A light joke.

He responded politely. Kindly. Briefly. Never opening the door.

One evening, she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Kabir," she said. "You don't have to—"

He straightened immediately. "I'm fine."

The words were calm. Absolute.

She withdrew.

Later, she sat on the sofa with her laptop open, pretending to work. Her phone vibrated. She hesitated, then picked it up. Angad's name lit the screen.

Kabir felt the change in the room without looking up. A shift. A softening he was no longer part of. He did not look.

The days continued like this. Disciplined. Contained.

Kabir's world shrank to what he could command. Flight. Fitness. Procedure. Everything else existed beyond a line he refused to cross.

The squadron doctor mentioned his neck casually during a routine check. "You're pushing too hard."

Kabir smiled. "Occupational hazard."

"Everything else okay?"

"Yes."

The answer was true — in the narrowest possible sense.

One night, Aditi cooked his favourite meal. He ate it. Thanked her. Washed the dishes.

Nothing changed.

Another night, she stayed up waiting. He came home late, smelling faintly of fuel and cold air.

She reached for him again. This time, he didn't pull away. His body accepted the contact without responding to it. That frightened her more than rejection would have.

"Kabir," she whispered.

He closed his eyes. "Please don't," he said softly. "Not like this."

She stepped back. "I don't know how to fix this."

He looked at her — really looked — and something raw flickered before he buried it. "Neither do I."

It was the most honest thing he had said in weeks.

Control was not peace. It was survival. Kabir knew that.

The house filled with signs of life — packages arriving, pictures framed, routines solidifying. On the surface, they were building something stable.

Underneath, Kabir narrowed his world further, compressing everything until it fit inside parameters he could hold. No escalation. No collapse.

The next day, he flew again. A clean sortie. No anomalies. No corrections worth mentioning.

When he shut down on the tarmac, the aircraft ticking softly as it cooled, he rested his helmet briefly against the canopy. Just for a moment. Not in relief. In acknowledgment.

After dinner, he stood at the window for a while, looking out at the colony lights. Somewhere outside, a scooter backfired. A dog barked .

At altitude, noise was constant but distant—engine, airflow, warnings calibrated to urgency.

Here, every sound felt closer. More intrusive.

He slept poorly that night. Not because of dreams—but because his body refused to fully shut down. Every position tugged at his neck. Every movement brought awareness back to itself.

In the early hours, he got up quietly and did mobility drills on the living room floor. Slow rotations. Controlled stretches. Breath measured.

Aditi watched from the doorway without him realising.

Flying still worked. It still narrowed the world to something exact.

As long as he stayed within limits — physical, emotional, procedural — he could keep going. He only knew that letting go—even a little—felt like free fall. And free fall, without a parachute, was not something he could afford.

Control was not healing. But it kept him airborne. And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 32

It happened without a warning.

No raised voices. No precipitating fight. No dramatic weather or power cuts or missed calls that might later be pointed to as the moment things went wrong. It arrived quietly, like fatigue. Like the last straw added carefully, almost politely, to a stack that had already been bending for too long.

Kabir came home later than usual.

The house was lit when he entered, the yellow glow from the living room spilling into the corridor. He paused just inside the door, helmet bag still in hand, listening. There was music playing softly—something old, unobtrusive. The kitchen smelled faintly of soap and something warm, cooked earlier and now put away.

Aditi was curled on the sofa, legs tucked beneath her, laptop closed beside her. She looked up when he entered.

“You’re late,” she said, not accusing. Just noting.

“Briefing ran long.”

She nodded. “I kept dinner warm.”

“Thank you.”

The exchange was ordinary. That was what made it dangerous.

Kabir set his bag down, removed his shoes, washed his hands. The water ran longer than necessary. He stood there, palms braced on the sink, head lowered, letting the sound drown out the quiet hum of his thoughts.

He was tired. Not the clean exhaustion of flying. Not the earned ache of physical strain. This was deeper. Accumulated. The kind that settled into bone and refused to be stretched out. When he returned to the living room, Aditi had already plated the food. She handed him a plate, fingers careful not to brush his.

They ate.

The television was off. The music continued at a low volume. Forks scraped gently against ceramic. Aditi talked about something inconsequential—a colleague, an upcoming deadline, a meeting she was dreading. Kabir listened, responded when required, nodded at the right places.

He could do this. He had been doing this.

But that night, the control felt thinner. Like a glove worn too often, the material stretched and fragile.

After dinner, Aditi cleared the plates. Kabir insisted on washing up. He always did now. It gave him something to finish. Something that ended cleanly.

When he returned, she had shifted closer to the centre of the sofa. The cushion that usually sat between them had been moved aside. It was a small thing.

It felt enormous.

He sat on the chair opposite out of habit. She watched him for a moment, then patted the space beside her. “Kabir,” she said quietly. “Come sit here.”

He hesitated. Just long enough for her to notice.

Then he moved. Slowly. He sat at the far end of the sofa, leaving a careful distance between them.

The music changed tracks. Something softer now.

Aditi adjusted, turning slightly toward him. She did not touch him yet.

They sat like that for a while. Not speaking. The silence stretched—not uncomfortable, exactly, but taut. Expectant.

“You are punishing me,” she said.

He looked at her. “I wasn’t.”

“You are.”

“No,” he replied evenly. “I was managing.”

She exhaled sharply. "You are disappearing."

That landed. He felt it in his chest, a dull, spreading ache. "I am still here," he said.

"Physically," she said. "Yes."

He looked away. She shifted closer.

This time, he did not move away.

Her shoulder brushed his arm. The contact was light, tentative, but it sent a shock through him that he had not prepared for. His body responded instantly—muscles tightening, breath catching.

He remained still.

She leaned in a little more, her head resting against his shoulder. Her hair smelled faintly of shampoo and something floral she had bought recently. He registered the details involuntarily, the way he always did, cataloguing sensory input like data.

She exhaled. Kabir closed his eyes.

This was how it happened. Not as a decision, but as surrender.

He told himself to move. To create space. To stand up and retreat into safety. Instead, his arm lifted. Hesitant. Heavy. He rested it around her shoulders.

The contact was careful, almost formal. But Aditi reacted instantly, her body softening against his, fitting into the space he had made as if it had always been hers.

Something inside him fractured. Not explosively. Quietly. A structural failure rather than a collapse.

Weeks of restraint, of discipline, of narrowing his world until it could not contain pain—everything gave way at once.

He turned toward her. The movement was sudden enough that she looked up, startled. Their faces were close now. Too close for restraint.

"Kabir—" she began.

He kissed her. It was not gentle. It was not angry either.

It was urgent. Unfiltered. As if he were trying to anchor himself to something solid before he drifted too far away.

She responded immediately, hands rising to his shoulders, fingers curling into fabric. She kissed him back with a hunger that felt both familiar and wrong.

They did not speak.

He lifted her, carried her to the bedroom with a strength that surprised them both. The bed creaked as they fell onto it, movement tangled, clumsy with need.

This was not reconciliation. It was collision.

Kabir was aware of everything—too aware. The way her breath hitched. The way her hands moved with practiced familiarity. The way her body responded to him even as something essential remained absent.

He sensed it. That slight delay. That fractional distance.

She was with him. But not entirely.

It devastated him even as he pushed deeper, as if intensity might bridge the gap that intention could not.

He did not speak her name. She said his. Once. Softly. Almost pleading. It broke something open in him.

He lost himself then—not in pleasure, but in release. In the temporary erasure of thought. In the raw physicality of being wanted, even imperfectly.

Afterwards, he did not move.

He lay beside her, chest rising and falling heavily, staring at the ceiling. The fan whirled above them, steady and indifferent. Somewhere outside, a dog barked once and went quiet again.

Aditi turned toward him, rested her head against his shoulder, her fingers tracing absent-minded patterns on his chest. The touch was familiar, intimate, something that once would have anchored him.

Now it only outlined the absence. He felt her touch. He could not feel with her.

The distinction hollowed him out.

She drifted into sleep quickly, exhaustion claiming her. Her breathing evened out, deep and slow. Kabir remained awake. His body ached. His neck protested when he shifted slightly. He ignored it.

He stared into the darkness, replaying everything he had felt—and everything he hadn't. He understood now. What he had feared. What he had refused to name.

She could give him her body. She could not give him her entirety.

And that—more than betrayal, more than jealousy—was what shattered him.

Sometime past midnight, he finally slept. Only to wake thirty minutes later to the shrill ring of his phone.

Orders. Classified. Immediate.

He was on his feet before the call ended, instinct taking over. The room snapped into focus. The ache receded, replaced by clarity.

Aditi stirred, disoriented.

"What was it?" she asked, voice thick with sleep.

"I have to go," he said, already dressing.

"Where?"

"Away."

Fear crossed her face—not confusion, not guilt. Fear.

"How long?"

"I don't know."

He did not soften the answer. He packed quickly. Efficiently. Muscle memory guiding him.

At the door, she reached for him.

He paused.

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She pressed her forehead to his chest, clinging to him as if the night had rearranged something inside her. "Be safe," she whispered.

He rested his hand on her back. Just once. "I always am," he said.

It was not reassurance. It was fact.

He left.

The house closed behind him.

And for the first time, Kabir did not know whether control would be enough to carry him through what came next.

The house did not rush to fill the space he left.

Aditi remained by the door long after it had closed, her hand hovering where the latch was, as if the act of touching it might undo something. The corridor light cast a thin line across the floor, dividing the room into before and after. She stood on the wrong side of it, uncertain when that had happened.

Only later did she register that he had not looked back.

She moved through the house slowly, deliberately, as if any sudden motion might crack the fragile quiet. The glass he had left on the counter still held the faint warmth of his palm. She rinsed it, dried it, set it upside down where it always went. The gesture felt ceremonial. Futile.

In the bedroom, the sheets were tangled, bearing evidence she did not want to catalogue. She smoothed them anyway, tugging at corners, pressing creases flat. Control by proxy. If the bed could be made orderly, perhaps the night could be, too.

She sat on the edge of the mattress and tried to name what she felt.

It was not regret. It was not satisfaction.

It was a hollowing—an understanding that what had passed between them had been real and insufficient at the same time.

She had wanted closeness. Warmth. Proof that he was still reachable.

Instead, she had felt how far inside himself he had retreated, even as his body remained with her. The awareness stung. She had not known how to bridge it without asking for something she was no longer certain she had the right to demand.

Morning came without permission.

Light seeped through the curtains, catching on familiar objects—the chair with clothes draped over it, the book he had not finished, the alarm clock he always forgot to set when he was home. Ordinary things, unchanged. That, too, felt cruel.

Kabir had not texted.

She told herself this meant nothing. He rarely did when he left abruptly. Routine, not rejection.

The thought did not settle.

She made tea and let it go cold on the counter. Stood by the window and watched the colony wake: a woman sweeping, a child being hurried along, a dog sleeping through it all. Life continued, indifferent to fracture.

Somewhere in the quiet, the memory of the night replayed—not the urgency, not the heat, but the moment after. His stillness. His eyes fixed on the ceiling as if the answer to something essential might be written there.

That was when she had known.

Not consciously. Not yet. But her body had understood before her mind did.

By afternoon, the house felt too large. Every room carried an echo of him—his restraint, his careful distance, the way he had touched her as if afraid of leaving fingerprints. She moved restlessly, unable to settle, unable to leave.

When evening fell again, she realised with a small, sharp ache that nothing had been resolved.

They had crossed a line without naming it. They had reached for each other without arriving.

And now the space between them was no longer quiet—it was charged, altered by the knowledge of what could not be undone.

Control, she understood then, was not the same as safety. And love—no matter how enduring—could still be outpaced by what remained unspoken.

The house stayed awake long after she finally lay down. Listening. Waiting.

Chapter 33

The briefing room was sealed.

Phones surrendered into numbered lockers. Windows shuttered, blinds double-checked. Even the air-conditioning seemed calibrated to a lower register, humming rather than whirring, as if the room itself understood the need for discretion.

The atmosphere was sharp enough to cut skin.

The screen lit up with maps that were deliberately sparse—no place names, no political borders, no colours that invited interpretation. Just corridors, threat envelopes, ingress and egress lines drawn with surgical restraint.

This was not a drill. The room knew it.

The pilots knew it before anyone said a word. The posture was different. Not tense exactly—controlled. The way men and women sat straighter without realising they had done so.

Pens aligned. Notebooks opened to fresh pages.

The air vibrated with a kind of contained urgency Kabir recognised immediately. This was what happened when diplomacy exhausted itself quietly and the military was asked to speak without words.

A Wing Commander stood at the front. No preamble. “Listen carefully,” he said. “What you’re about to hear does not leave this room. Not to spouses. Not to parents. Not to yourselves.”

He paused, letting the weight of that settle.

Strike packages were outlined with clinical economy.

Sukhois formed the spine of the operation—not for spectacle, not for bravado, but for what they could endure. Weather. Range. Payload. Redundancy. The ability to absorb punishment and still execute. Su-30MKIs would lead the penetration element, paired and staggered, their roles overlapping by design. Electronic warfare aircraft would remain outside threat envelopes, shaping the battlespace from a distance—jamming not to blind, but to confuse, to delay, to fracture certainty at exactly the wrong moments.

AWACS loitered high and far, stitching the airspace into coherence. Tankers orbited in disciplined racetrack patterns, fuel calculations built with margins so thin they allowed no improvisation and no error. Everything was synchronised.

Minutes mattered. Seconds mattered more.

Targets were not spoken of as places or people. They were objectives. Coordinates. Expected effects.

Neutralisation windows were narrow by intent. Threat assumptions were conservative by doctrine. Enemy air defence was layered and uneven—legacy radar-guided SAMs upgraded just enough to behave unpredictably, infrared MANPADS clustered thick around hardened sites, optical systems slaved into a network that rewarded patience and punished carelessness.

Kabir listened without blinking.

His name appeared on the board. Call sign assigned. Position defined: forward penetration, strike lead, tasked additionally with local air dominance if the situation degraded.

Dogfighting was not the plan. It was the contingency.

No one said the word *escalation*, but it hung in the room, dense and unspoken. If this crossed a line, the sky would not remain empty. There would be no controlled margins.

Kabir felt the shift settle into his spine—familiar, unwelcome, inevitable.

This was what the simulators had been for. Not the graphics. Not the scores. The narrowing. The responsibility.

The flight line vibrated with restrained energy. Ground crew moved with an efficiency bordering on reverence. Panels opened and sealed. Fasteners

torqued. Pins removed and accounted for. Hands moved quickly but never hurried. The aircraft did not tolerate sloppiness.

Kabir walked toward his Sukhoi, helmet under his arm, G-suit already biting into his thighs.

The aircraft waited—canards still, intakes dark, massive and patient. Lethal without motion. He ran his hand briefly along the fuselage. Not sentiment. Not superstition. A grounding reflex older than rational thought.

Ladder up. Cockpit entered. Harness locked. Seat armed. Displays blooming to life.

Checks flowed automatically. INS alignment confirmed against GPS. Navigation solution stable. Radar operational but emission-controlled. Weapons powered, armed but safe. Electronic warfare suite green—radar warning receiver alive, missile approach warning system sensitive and unforgiving.

Oxygen steady. Cabin pressure nominal. The canopy sealed with a soft hiss.

The world collapsed inward—glass, symbols, tone. Emotion lost jurisdiction here.

“Package Alpha, picture clean. Cleared as briefed,” AWACS said.

They rolled. Acceleration pressed Kabir back, solid and familiar. Rotation. Positive climb. Gear up on profile. Formation locked.

They climbed briefly, then descended as planned, terrain swallowing them whole.

The border passed without ceremony. No line. Only numbers changing.

Radios stayed quiet. Brevity codes carried weight. Emissions discipline held.

Kabir flew not fast, not cautious—correct. Engaged as instructed. Then the cockpit beeped.

The first alert came as a tone. Missile activity. Uncorrelated. Not confirmed.

His body moved before thought. Countermeasures selected. Hands positioned.

He banked hard, dropped altitude, terrain rushing up as the Sukhoi folded itself into valleys memorised down to contour and shadow. The aircraft responded instantly, computers translating violence into survivable geometry.

The tone faded. Returned. Confirmed. Radar-guided SAM.

Kabir did not spike. He displaced laterally, altered altitude by metres, heading by degrees so small they would have looked meaningless to anyone not trained to understand how missiles thought. Jammers modulated. Terrain masked.

The lock degraded. Lost.

They pressed. Weapons parameters resolved cleanly. Consent tone. Stores away.

Effects confirmation followed seconds later. Objectives neutralised. They turned. And the airspace tightened.

“Multiple airborne contacts. Bandits high. Hot vectors.”

The calm in AWACS's voice was not reassuring. It was earned.

Enemy fighters had scrambled. Not probing. Committing.

Kabir adjusted altitude, building energy, managing geometry. The G-suit tightened around his legs as he climbed.

“Engage as required.” That was it.

There was nothing cinematic about what followed.

No narration. No time to think in sentences.

Only geometry at speed.

Kabir rolled hard, pulled into high-G, anti-G breathing snapping into rhythm as his vision tunneled. He felt blood drain, felt pressure bloom behind his eyes, forced it down.

A hostile aircraft crossed his forward quarter—too close. The missile warning system did not shout. It informed.

Kabir flared, dispensed countermeasures, rolled and dove. Flares burned behind him in disciplined sequence, each one a calculated lie. His right hand stayed measured. He trusted the control laws to save him from excess.

“Alpha Two, defensive.”

The terrain surged upward again. Hills became shields. Valleys became exits. The EW suite escalated—noise, false angles, ghosts painted across hostile scopes.

The warning stuttered. Cut. Not destroyed. Confused.

Kabir did not allow relief.

Another contact crossed his nose.

Lock. Tone. Fire.

The missile separated cleanly. Kabir watched just long enough to confirm guidance, then broke away. There was no need to witness outcome.

“Splash one,” AWACS said seconds later.

No reaction followed.

Another warning—different. Sharper.

Confirmed SAM. Improved logic. Persistent.

Kabir altered speed, aspect, signature. Margins invisible on paper, decisive in air. Countermeasures deployed in rhythm, not panic. The missile chased. Hesitated. Failed.

Another alert—infrared. Close.

Kabir pushed the Sukhoi into a regime most pilots only touched in simulators. High alpha. Edge of envelope. The aircraft protested, then complied, control laws smoothing his violence into survival.

Another jet flashed past—so close Kabir registered colour, helmet markings, canopy glare.

Human. Irrelevant.

He hauled the stick. Trusted the airframe. Trusted the margins.

The missile missed by metres.

“Disengage. Fuel state critical.”

Doctrine reasserted itself.

Kabir broke away exactly as briefed. No pursuit. No deviation. Exit profile flown with brutal discipline.

They cleared the zone. No losses.

Silence returned.

The return leg was heavier—not because danger was gone, but because nothing remained except execution and endurance.

Cabin pressure stabilised. The G-suit loosened. Adrenaline drained, leaving ache behind. Kabir noticed his jaw—locked tight. His neck burned. His hands resisted unclenching.

He ignored all of it.

Approach. Centreline. Touchdown.

Brakes bit. Heat surged. Speed bled away.

He taxied clear, following the marshaller's batons. No flourish. No words. Shutdown came in sequence. Radar cold. EW silent. Weapons safe.

Only then did he exhale.

The canopy lifted. Air rushed in—fuel, dust, scorched rubber. The aircraft ticked as it cooled. On the apron, ground crew moved in immediately. Chocks placed. Ladders positioned. Safety pins reinserted.

Kabir climbed down, helmet under his arm, face unreadable. Someone later would remark on it—how calm he had looked, how unaffected. The truth was simpler. He had not yet allowed himself to feel anything. His legs shook once before steadying. He stood still until the world stopped tilting.

No applause. There never was. This was not a performance. It was a job.

The debrief room was colder than the briefing room had been. Lights harsh. Screens unforgiving. There was no congratulations. There were questions.

Every second replayed. Every turn scrutinised. Missile warnings time-stamped and analysed. Countermeasure effectiveness plotted against threat models.

“Why did you hold that heading for three seconds longer than briefed?”

Kabir answered without defensiveness. “Terrain masking required confirmation. Adjusted within tolerance.”

“Why not disengage earlier?”

“Fuel state permitted continued escort.”

No one raised their voice. No one needed to. Missiles discussed as probabilities. Threat systems as behaviours. Kabir spoke only when required. When missile footage played—his own aircraft from hostile sensor

perspectives—Kabir watched without reaction. He did not flinch at the proximity. Did not shift in his seat. Did not look away when the moment of near-impact froze on screen.

“We’ll update assumptions,” the senior officer said.

Someone noticed. Made a note.

Outside, another sortie was already preparing.

Kabir stood for a moment longer than necessary, the echo of speed still inside his bones. Then he turned away. He had crossed a line. And crossed back. He had come close. Closer than doctrine liked

Closer than anyone at home would ever know.

Tomorrow, they would fly again.

Aditi watched the news obsessively.

Nothing concrete. Speculation masquerading as analysis. Silence where clarity should have been.

Sukhois were mentioned.

She stopped breathing. She called Kabir. No answer.

Families called her. She had none to reassure her, none who knew enough to ask the right questions.

She called Angad. He dismissed it lightly. “It’s all posturing,” he said. “You’re overthinking.”

She ended the call without explanation.

For the first time, the emotional pull evaporated completely. What remained was fear—pure, unadorned, stripping everything else away.

Kabir came home three days later.

She opened the door before he knocked, as if sensing him through the walls.

She did not know about the missile tones, the angles, the fractions of seconds where survival had balanced on discipline alone. She only knew the way he stood when she opened the door.

She broke when she saw him. Cried openly, without restraint, without dignity.

Kabir held her. This time, fully.

"I was scared," she said into his shoulder.

"I know," he replied.

He did not tell her what had happened. But when she looked at him, she knew enough. And she understood, without being told, that something essential had happened in the sky—something that had altered him in ways neither of them could yet name.

Not broken. Not hardened. But irrevocably changed.

Chapter 34

Kabir came home changed in ways that refused easy language.

There was no visible wound. No limp, no scar, no dramatic silence that announced itself as trauma. He unpacked his bag methodically, placed his boots where they always went, rinsed his mug after tea and set it upside down on the counter as he had done every evening since they moved in. He slept through the night. He ate when food was put in front of him. He listened when spoken to.

And yet—something in him had crossed a line and returned altered.

Aditi sensed it not in what he said, but in what he no longer needed to say. In the way his attention sharpened without strain. In the stillness he carried, not brittle but dense, like pressure held deliberately in check.

He did not talk about where he had been. He never did. But this time, the absence of detail did not feel like routine. It felt like containment.

She noticed it first when he stood by the window one evening, looking out at the colony lights with an expression that was neither distant nor distracted. He was present—fully, unavoidably present—but oriented differently, as if the axis of his attention had shifted somewhere she could not follow.

“Everything okay?” she asked, lightly.

He turned to her at once. No delay. No recalibration. “Yes,” he said. And meant it.

That frightened her more than silence would have. Because fear, she realised with a clarity that startled her, had been absent until now.

During the mission—whatever it had been—she had worried abstractly, the way one worried about storms on the horizon or news headlines that felt distant and impersonal. She had watched the news, yes. Noted speculation. Felt the brief constriction of breath when Sukhois were mentioned.

But it was only now, with him standing safely in front of her, that the fear arrived.

Late. Unreasonable. Devastating.

It came not as panic, but as recognition. She had imagined losing him—and survived the imagining. And that knowledge rearranged something fundamental inside her.

The conversations with Angad had begun to lengthen almost without her noticing when they crossed a line.

At first, they had been brief. Stray messages arriving at odd hours, phrased casually enough to appear harmless. *How are you, really? Do you ever think about those days?* It had seemed natural, even inevitable. There was history there, and history, she told herself, did not disappear simply because time had passed. It lay dormant, waiting for a moment of weakness or nostalgia or curiosity.

She believed herself strong enough now. Believed whatever they spoke about would remain contained—sealed off from her present life like a museum exhibit. Interesting, distant, harmless. A glass case she could peer into without disturbing what lay inside.

But Angad had always known how to linger.

He never rushed a conversation toward closure. He left thoughts unfinished, questions hanging in the air like doors left deliberately ajar. He had done this even when they were younger—kept things suspended, unresolved, so that she remained engaged, waiting for the next sentence, the next reassurance, the next explanation that never quite came.

Slowly, imperceptibly, Aditi found herself replying more fully. Elaborating where she could have stopped. Explaining where silence might have done the work. She slipped easily into old rhythms with him, surprised by how familiar his cadence still felt, how quickly her mind adjusted itself to his pace.

They spoke of the past often. Not in specifics at first—no dates, no arguments, no decisive moments—but in broad, sentimental strokes. He spoke of that

phase, of how intense it had been, how rare. How people spent lifetimes chasing what they had stumbled into so young.

“You know,” he said once, voice thoughtful, almost reverent, “some connections don’t really end. They just... pause.”

She had smiled reflexively then, at the poetry of it. The idea was flattering in the way old myths were—familiar, comforting, deeply unexamined. It framed their ending as accidental rather than inevitable. Suspended rather than concluded.

But as the days passed, she began to notice a pattern.

Angad spoke often of *what could have been*. It was his favourite phrase, delivered with a wistfulness that bordered on performance. He spoke of the life they might have had if timing had been kinder, if circumstances had aligned, if he had been different—though that last part was never said outright.

“What we had was ahead of its time,” he said one evening, as if describing a work of art misunderstood by its era. “We were too young. Too intense. If we’d met later, things would have been different.”

Different how? she wondered. She did not ask.

Because when Angad spoke of the past, he did so selectively. He remembered the passion, the urgency, the way she had once looked at him as if he were the centre of her universe. He remembered being wanted. Being chosen. Being the axis around which her emotions had revolved.

What he never remembered were the absences. The cancelled plans. The weeks he disappeared into work without explanation. The way she learned to measure time by his availability rather than her own needs. The arguments that ended not in resolution but exhaustion—her tears met with irritation, his silence framed as maturity rather than withdrawal.

When she mentioned these things gently, cautiously, he waved them away.

“That was just immaturity,” he said. “We were kids. I didn’t know how to balance things then.” There was no apology in his tone. No reckoning. Only dismissal, as though those moments were minor footnotes in an otherwise epic story. As though her pain had been incidental rather than structural.

Something loosened inside her—not pain exactly, but clarity.

He began speaking in the language of destiny. Of unfinished business. Of threads never properly tied.

"I sometimes feel like you were my great almost," he told her one night. "The one I never quite got over."

It should have felt romantic. Instead, it felt hollow.

Because even as he spoke, she realised he was not asking how she had survived their ending. He did not ask what it had cost her. He did not ask who she had become, or how loving him had shaped her, or how she had put herself back together afterward.

He spoke as though she had been preserved exactly as he had left her—waiting, paused, untouched by time.

Kabir never appeared directly in these conversations.

Angad never asked about him outright. Never spoke his name unless prompted. Instead, he referred to him obliquely, as if avoiding granting him substance.

"He seems... steady," Angad said once, after Aditi mentioned something casually about her marriage. The word carried an edge sharpened by what he did not say. "Very different from me."

She sensed the comparison immediately—not between two men, but between two versions of herself.

Angad never criticised Kabir outright. That would have required acknowledging him as real competition. Instead, he positioned himself as something else entirely—not an alternative, but an inevitability.

"I think some people come into your life to show you what passion feels like," he said softly. "Others give you comfort. Both matter. But they're not the same."

It was said with such quiet certainty that it took her a moment to recognise the manipulation beneath it. The way he placed himself as the irreplaceable experience, the benchmark against which all other loves would fall short.

For the first time, irritation surfaced.

Because what Angad called passion, she remembered as anxiety. What he called intensity, she remembered as imbalance. The highs had been real—but

so had the vigilance, the constant bracing for disappointment, the sense that love was something she had to earn repeatedly.

And Kabir—steady, present, unglamorous in his reliability—had never once made her feel like she was waiting to be chosen.

It was after Kabir's return that everything sharpened.

Not because he demanded reassurance or closeness—he did neither—but because his presence carried a gravity that rearranged her priorities without effort. She watched him sleep one night, deeply and without restlessness, and felt a surge of fear so sudden it made her sit up.

She imagined the phone ringing instead of the door opening. Imagined uniforms instead of his quiet entrance. Imagined absence not as inconvenience, but as erasure.

And for the first time, the conversations with Angad felt not indulgent, but reckless.

She began to hear the repetition in his words. The way he circled the same regrets without moving toward accountability. He spoke of timing, of fate, of youth—never of choice.

When she asked him once, directly, “Do you ever think about why we didn’t work?” he paused.

“I think the world got in the way,” he said finally. Not *I did*. Not *we did*.

The world—an amorphous villain, conveniently blameless.

She understood then: Angad had not changed. He had refined his language.

The self-absorption remained, cloaked now in introspection. The emotional inertia disguised as wistfulness. He was telling the same story, only with better words.

And in that story, she was still supporting cast.

“You ruined me for other women,” he said once, half-laughing.

It landed not as flattery, but as burden. Because she saw then that he did not love the woman she had become. He loved the version of her that had loved him without conditions. The one who bent. The one who waited.

She noticed how often his longing required her silence, her affirmation, her labour. How rarely he asked what she needed from these conversations.

If she stepped back into his orbit, nothing would be different.

Angad was not offering her a future. He was offering her a loop.

She met him on a weekday afternoon in Chandigarh. The café was bright, crowded enough to discourage intimacy. She arrived first. Ordered tea. Her hands were steady.

Angad arrived late. He always did now.

He spoke of work first—frustrations, people who failed to recognise his vision. He framed his life as perpetually on the brink of something larger, as though the present were merely a staging ground.

"I keep thinking," he said later, "how different things would have been if timing hadn't been so off."

"Timing wasn't the only thing," she said.

He laughed softly. "You were always harder on us than necessary."

Us. The word landed heavy with assumption.

Their conversation moved easily into memory. Old jokes. Shared shorthand. Comfort without depth. She watched herself participate—and simultaneously observe.

When he spoke of Kabir's work, resentment surfaced in subtle ways. Comparisons disguised as concern.

"He must enjoy the attention," Angad said. "Men like that thrive on ceremony."

"It matters to him," she replied.

"That kind of validation usually does."

She heard it clearly then—the diminishing of what he could not rival. Discipline recast as dependence. Service reframed as performance.

Angad positioned himself as the man who *felt*, rather than functioned.

And suddenly she saw it: he was not interested in her present life. He wanted to reclaim a version of her that existed before it.

She spoke out the simplest truth. "I can't do this anymore."

He leant back, expression shifting from concern to mild irritation. "Do what?"

"This," she says, gesturing vaguely between them. "Us. Whatever this is."

Angad exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. "This again?"

She did not flinch. "Yes," she says. "This again."

He laughed softly, not kindly. "You're overthinking. You always do."

The words landed with a clarity that surprised her. There it is, she thought. The reflexive dismissal.

She felt something loosen inside her chest—not pain, exactly. Recognition. "This isn't about thinking," she said. "It's about choosing."

He frowned. "Choosing what?"

She met his gaze steadily. "My marriage."

The word hung between them, solid and undeniable. Angad's expression hardened. "So this is because of him," he said.

"No," she replied. "It's because of me."

He scoffed. "Come on, Aditi. You don't owe him martyrdom."

She felt a flash of heat—anger, sharp and unexpected. "This isn't martyrdom," she said. "It's commitment."

He leaned forward now, voice lowering. "He's never going to be able to give you what you need."

She did not interrupt.

"He's married to his job," Angad continued. "You saw that. You still see it. You're always going to come second."

A week ago, those words would have found purchase. Today, they fell flat.

"You're wrong," she said quietly.

He laughed again, sharper this time. "Am I? He disappears without warning. He doesn't tell you where he goes. You sit at home watching the news, terrified, while he plays hero."

Something inside her went cold. "Don't," she said.

"Why not?" he pressed. "It's true."

She leaned forward, meeting his intensity without matching his tone. "He doesn't 'play' anything," she said. "He does his job. And he does it with discipline and restraint and a sense of responsibility you wouldn't understand if I explained it to you."

Angad's jaw tightened. "There it is," he said. "The uniform worship."

She stood. The movement was sudden enough that nearby tables glance over. "No," she said. "This is where we stop."

He looked up at her, startled now.

"You don't get to belittle him," she continued. "Not to me. Not ever."

"Aditi—"

"This is goodbye." The words were calm. Final.

He stood too, disbelief flickering across his face. "You're making a mistake."

She picked up her bag. "No," she said. "I made one. This is me correcting it."

He looked startled. Then amused. "You can't just—"

"I can," she said. "And I am."

"Is Kabir making you do this?"

"Kabir doesn't even know I'm here."

That stopped him.

"Please don't contact me again." She left without looking back.

Outside, the air felt different. Lighter.

She walked without hurry, allowing the city to absorb her. The noise. The movement. The ordinariness of everything continuing despite the quiet ending she has just enacted.

Her phone vibrated. She ignored it.

By the time she reached home, the sun had shifted, the light slanting differently through the windows. The house welcomed her without judgment.

She set her bag down. Moved through the rooms slowly, touching familiar surfaces—the bookshelf, the kitchen counter, the back of the sofa where Kabir sits in the evenings.

She did not feel triumphant. She felt clean.

That night, Kabir stood in the kitchen washing dishes.

She watched him from the doorway. The way his shoulders moved. The quiet efficiency. The calm that did not seek attention.

She crossed the room and wrapped her arms around him from behind. He paused. Then leaned back slightly, fitting into the hold.

“I was scared,” she said.

“I know,” he replied.

She buried her face against him. Not because she had probably nearly lost him. But because she had almost forgotten what mattered.

And because, for the first time, she understood: fear was not the enemy. Avoiding it was.

And love—real love—was not the thing that burned brightest. It was the thing that survived.

Chapter 35

The notice arrived without ceremony. Kabir found it wedged between routine signals and weather updates, a single line buried in the operational inbox that pilots learned, early in their careers, to read with particular care. There were words that did not announce themselves loudly but carried disproportionate weight—*selected, nominated, designated*. This one did not use any of them.

It simply stated that he was to be part of the Air Force Day flypast contingent. He read it twice. Then once more. No exclamation. No congratulations. No explanation.

That was how these things were done.

He closed the message and sat back, the chair creaking slightly beneath him. Outside the squadron building, the day moved on as usual—ground crew shouting over engines, a distant cough of a start cart, the metallic smell of fuel carried on the wind. Nothing in the base's rhythm acknowledged what the message meant.

Someone had noticed him. He did not dwell on that thought for long. He had learned, over years of service, that speculation was a dangerous indulgence. Selection for a ceremonial flypast—especially on Air Force Day—was not a reward in the way medals were, nor was it a promotion. It was an assessment. A quiet test of precision, temperament, and trust.

He did not question it. He did not ask why. He did not tell anyone immediately.

That evening, when he came home, he mentioned it to Aditi the way one mentioned an extension of duty hours or an unexpected sortie—matter-of-fact, stripped of context.

“I’ll be flying more over the next couple of weeks,” he said, washing his hands at the sink. “Longer days. Might have to go to Ghaziabad for a day or two.”

She looked up from the stove. “Ghaziabad?”

“Hindon,” he clarified. “Rehearsals.”

She nodded. Asked no further questions. She had learned, over time, which details would be offered and which would not.

Later, he called his father. The reaction on the other end of the line was immediate and unguarded.

“Air Force Day?” his father repeated, as though tasting the words. “You’re flying on Air Force Day?”

“Yes,” Kabir said simply.

There was a pause—thick, emotional. Kabir could picture him then, sitting in the familiar chair by the window, phone pressed to his ear, chest swelling in a way he would never articulate. IAF containment was too deeply embedded in him, even all these years after retirement.

“This is a very big honour,” his father said finally. “Do you understand that?”

Kabir smiled faintly. “I understand.”

“You must have been selected.”

“Yes.”

“Not everyone gets this,” his father went on, voice warming. “It means they trust you. It means—”

Kabir let him speak. Pride, he had learned, needed space.

Later that week, her father-in-law mentioned it to Aditi, almost casually, though his voice carried something close to reverence. “Kabir is flying on Air Force Day,” he said. “Leading the formation, I hear.”

Aditi froze, just briefly, before composing herself. “Oh,” she said. “That’s... nice.”

"Nice?" he laughed. "This is a huge honour. Not everyone gets to do this. We're very proud of him."

She smiled. Nodded. Said nothing more. She did not ask Kabir about it that night. Or the next. Or the one after that.

Somehow, it felt important not to.

The preparation began quietly and then consumed everything.

Flypast training was not glamorous. It was relentless, exacting, and unforgiving of ego. For weeks, Kabir's days followed a punishing rhythm—early briefings, formation work, low-level navigation rehearsals, timing drills that reduced flight to numbers and geometry.

The Sukhoi-30MKI was a forgiving aircraft in many ways—powerful, responsive, deeply intelligent—but formation flying stripped away its indulgences. At low altitude, high speed, in tight proximity to other jets, the aircraft demanded absolute discipline.

They flew stacked sorties—two, sometimes three a day—rehearsing ingress lines, altitude gates, spacing. The route to Hindon was memorised not as a map but as a sequence of cues: river bend, highway cut, water tower, treeline. Time over target mattered more than speed; spacing mattered more than individuality.

Kabir flew as leader. That, too, went unspoken.

As leader, his responsibility was not merely to hold his own line but to *be* the line—to fly a reference so stable that the aircraft around him could lock onto his movement and trust it implicitly. Any deviation, however small, amplified itself across the formation.

He did not enjoy the responsibility. He respected it.

At night, he came home bone-tired. Aditi learned to recognise the particular quiet that followed days like those—a silence not born of withdrawal but of containment. She did not push. She placed food in front of him. Let the rhythm of routine do its work.

A few days before October, the squadron deployed to Ghaziabad.

The move itself was procedural—bags packed, gear checked, aircraft repositioned. Hindon Air Force Station was different from Sirsa in ways that

mattered immediately. It was closer to the city, closer to the civilian eye, heavier with history and ceremony. The air carried more noise, more density.

Aditi travelled to Delhi a day later, and to Ghaziabad the day after, with her parents and his. The city hit her like a wall. It was louder than she remembered. More congested. The roads felt narrower, the air heavier. The weight of people and purpose pressed in from all sides. Delhi and Ghaziabad] did not pause for anyone's routine.

Aditi had told herself she would be calm. She repeated it like a mantra as she stood among the crowd, fingers laced together so tightly they hurt, eyes fixed on the stretch of sky that felt at once endless and brutally close. Calm. Reasonable. Adult. She had watched him fly before—on screens, in grainy videos forwarded by well-meaning friends, once from far enough away that the aircraft had been nothing more than a silver slash against blue. Those times, fear had been distant, manageable, something she could fold away and sit on.

This was different. This was close enough to feel the sound before it arrived, close enough for the air to thrum through her ribs and settle in her bones. Close enough to see heat shimmer behind the engines, to watch sunlight slide along metal skin

On the morning of Air Force Day, they drove to Hindon early.

The base was transformed. Uniforms everywhere—shades of blue stretching to the horizon. Veterans in blazers heavy with medals. Young officers standing straighter than necessary. Families gathered in clusters, voices low, eyes scanning the sky even before there was anything to see.

Aditi stood between her parents and her in-laws, feeling oddly suspended. She had asked Kabir once, earlier, almost tentatively. “Will I know when you’re coming?”

He had smiled then, a rare softness breaking through the professional reserve. “You’ll hear us before you see us.”

She remembered that now.

The ceremony below unfolded—speeches, salutes, the steady rhythm of protocol—but her attention drifted upward, drawn by an anticipation she could not articulate.

And then— a sound. Low. Distant. Almost felt before it was heard.

The crowd reacted on cue—gasps, cheers, phones lifted, children squealing in delight. Aditi barely registered any of it.

A line appeared on the horizon—tiny, dark, impossibly precise. Sukhois, advancing in perfect geometry, sunlight glinting off their canopies. Her gaze followed the aircraft with a focus so sharp it hurt, as if looking away might somehow loosen her grip on him.

Aditi's breath caught. She knew. She did not know how—there was no visible marker, no sign—but she knew that Kabir was there. Leading. Holding that line steady. She knew the way his body would be braced, the way his hands would rest on the controls, relaxed but alert. She knew the quiet inside him when he flew, the way the noise outside seemed to create a stillness within.

The roar reached them seconds later—thunderous, visceral, shaking something loose in her chest. The sound was not just loud; it was physical, pressing into bone and breath.

She felt herself smile despite herself. Felt her hands clench.

Then something changed.

It wasn't dramatic. There was no explosion, no sudden dive that made the crowd scream outright. It was subtler than that, and because of that, far worse. A hesitation. A fractional stutter in the sound, like a skipped heartbeat. A break in rhythm that didn't belong.

The aircraft climbed—and then didn't quite finish the climb.

The reaction around her was immediate. A gasp—not the collective intake of awe, but something sharper. Aditi felt it before she understood it. Her stomach dropped, her breath caught painfully in her chest. From somewhere nearby, someone gasped. Another voice shouted something incoherent, sharp with fear. A tongue of flame flared—too bright, too sudden, wrong in colour, wrong in duration.

Her father-in-law stiffened beside her. Not smiling now. His jaw clenched, eyes narrowing, posture changing from pride to alertness in a fraction of a second.

Her hands flew to her mouth. For a moment, her mind emptied completely. No thoughts, no words, no memories—just one overwhelming certainty that flooded her whole being.

Not again. I cannot lose him again.

Inside the cockpit, the warning did not arrive politely. It tore through the confined space in a violent scream of red and sound, lights flaring with urgent insistence. Left engine fire indication.

Kabir's body reacted before his mind did. Muscles locked, spine straightened, hands steadied the stick with the reflexes drilled into him over years of flying machines that punished hesitation. The words on the display were clinical, procedural. They came with a checklist, a narrowing of options, a grim clarity.

And yet—something didn't fit.

Even as the warning screamed, something in him resisted. The aircraft didn't feel like it was dying. She was heavy, yes, fuel-laden and powerful, but she was still talking to him—through the pressure on the stick, through the way the nose resisted just a fraction longer than it would have if things were truly catastrophic.

Behind him, the WSO's voice cut in, sharp and urgent. Data flooded in too fast, sensor inputs conflicting, engine parameters flickering between normal and not. It was chaos compressed into seconds.

For a suspended heartbeat, Kabir saw everything at once: the crowd below, tiny and exposed; the altitude bleeding away; the knife-edge choice between following the book to the letter and trusting the aircraft beneath him.

Somewhere in that frozen instant, a thought surfaced—not of applause or spectacle, but of silence. Of what comes after the noise fades. Of the way absence lingers longer than sound ever does.

Then training snapped into place with ruthless clarity.

"No fire," he said calmly, even as the warning continued to scream. "Compressor stall. I have control."

He froze the aircraft first, neutralising the instinctive correction that could have made things worse. He killed the afterburner, adjusted airflow, manually balanced thrust. The Sukhoi shuddered—once, violently—a sideways lurch that would later look terrifying on video, the kind that made people swear and clutch at each other.

But she obeyed.

The warning light went dark. The aircraft steadied, no longer fighting him, no longer trying to frighten him into a mistake.

Three seconds. That was all.

The jet steadied. He held it there, eyes locked, breathing controlled.

Then—parameters settled. He re-engaged normal control logic.

The line re-stitched itself. To the crowd, it read as drama. To trained eyes, it was unmistakable.

Pilot flying the jet again.

Kabir flew her past the crowd once more, lower now, faster—not as part of the display, not for bravado, but because sometimes control is something you have to demonstrate, even to yourself.

The rest of the flypast passed without incident.

Kabir flew the egress cleanly, hands steady, voice calm over the radio. It was only on landing—wheels down, brakes engaged, aircraft rolling to a stop—that the weight of what had happened began to surface.

On the ground, Aditi's body betrayed her before she could stop it. A sob tore out of her, raw and undignified. Her knees buckled, and she folded onto the edge of the temporary bleacher without remembering how she got there. The world tilted strangely, sound arriving late, as if through water.

The sky felt too big.

She had loved the sky once—or at least, she had loved what it gave him. The way his eyes changed when he talked about flying, the calm that settled over him when everything else felt complicated. She had watched him walk away in uniform with pride braided tightly around fear and told herself this was simply the price of loving a man like Kabir.

But nothing had prepared her for this.

The Sukhoi screamed overhead again and for a split second it was magnificent once more—metal and sunlight and controlled violence. And then the flame was gone. The sound smoothed. The aircraft steadied and tore past as if defying the sky itself.

Aditi collapsed forward, forehead pressed to her clasped hands, breath coming in harsh, broken gasps. She was crying openly now, uncaring who saw. Tears spilled unchecked because her body no longer needed to be brave.

Protocol took over with practiced efficiency. Engines spooled down. Ground crew moved in with deliberate calm, refusing to let urgency look like panic.

Kabir climbed down the ladder slowly. Every movement was measured—not from weakness, but from experience. Adrenaline leaves in stages, and he knew better than to trust his legs too quickly. His hands trembled just slightly as he handed the aircraft over, fingers stiff, reluctant to let go.

He walked away from the jet without looking back.

Later came the debriefs, the checks, the careful reduction of terror into language that could be written down. A false fire indication. A compressor stall. Correctly handled. Aircraft safe. The incident shrank under official words, flattened into something that fit neatly on paper. None of it touched what had actually happened.

“Well handled,” someone said. “Good hands,” someone else said

Only later, alone, did Kabir allow the thought through. *If he had hesitated.*

That night, at the celebration, Aditi found him standing slightly apart from the crowd. She touched his arm. “I saw it,” she said quietly.

He looked at her, really looked. Saw the tremor she was holding back. “I know,” he said. He had known she cared. He had known she worried. But this... this was terror stripped bare, fear without defences. This was love that had stopped negotiating with itself.

Her voice broke. “You scared me.”

“I know,” he said again.

She swallowed. “I didn’t know it could be that close.”

He nodded. “Neither did they.”

She looked up at him then, eyes shining with something raw and unguarded.

“I’m proud of you,” she said. This time, she did not hold it back.

And for the first time that day, Kabir let himself feel the full measure of what had almost been lost. “I didn’t think about you up there,” he admitted quietly. “Not consciously. If I had, I might have hesitated.”

She nodded, swallowing hard. “I know.”

Then, softer still, the truth she could no longer avoid: "But I thought about you every second."

Kabir's arm tightened around her waist, eyes closing. The image of how the nose had dipped flashed behind his eyelids—but it no longer held the same power.

He was here. She was here.

And something settled between them, heavy and undeniable. Not caution. Not recovery. Not the careful rebuilding they had wanted.

This was love that had stared fear in the face and stayed anyway.

Aditi would realise later that this was the moment everything rearranged itself inside her. Not the first night. Not the attempts at reconciliation. Not the days when he had gone away. Not the words they would one day say aloud.

This.

Chapter 36

Back home, life returned to its usual contours.

The days did not announce themselves as different. There were no ruptures, no dramatic silences, no sudden tendernesses that demanded explanation. Morning light still filtered through the curtains in the same pale bands. The kettle still whistled too sharply in the compact kitchen. The fan ticked softly as it turned. The kitchen filled with the familiar smells of tempering oil and onions. The street outside announced itself at predictable hours—the vegetable seller in the late afternoon, children racing cycles before dusk, the distant bark of a dog that never seemed to belong to anyone.

Kabir still left early, boots thudding softly against the floor, careful not to wake her if he could help it.

And yet, Aditi carried Air Force Day inside her like a lodged shard.

It surfaced at unexpected moments—when a low aircraft passed overhead and she felt her breath hitch; in the middle of a sentence; while standing at the sink, hands submerged in soapy water; when she caught sight of Kabir standing very still, shoulders squared in that particular way that meant his thoughts had narrowed into something disciplined and unreachable. Even joy now had an edge. Pride came threaded with fear.

She remembered the sound first—the roar that had seemed to arrive inside her chest before it reached her ears. She remembered the way the sky had looked impossibly wide and suddenly intimate. And most of all, she remembered the shift around her: the gasps that were not admiration, the sharp intake of breath beside her, the way her father-in-law's pride had turned, in an instant, into something taut and frightened.

She had not spoken of it since. Neither had Kabir.

He folded himself back into routine with a precision that bordered on ritual. He ran. He flew. He came home. He ate. He slept.

Silence that was not hostile, but not quite ease either, as though waiting for something neither of them had yet said aloud. They lived alongside each other carefully.

That evening, dinner was unremarkable. Dal. Rice. A simple vegetable stir-fry. Chicken. They ate seated across from each other, exchanging fragments of conversation that skimmed the surface of their days. They talked about neutral things—the quality of vegetables that week, a colleague of Aditi's who had resigned, a minor irritation Kabir had with a procurement delay. It was all safe. All contained.

Nothing false. Nothing intimate.

Aditi noticed, as she often did now, how carefully Kabir inhabited space. How he never brushed against her unless necessary. How he seemed to carry an invisible boundary around himself, one he respected even when it cost him.

After dinner, Kabir moved into the living room.

He didn't turn on the television. He didn't pick up his phone. He went straight to the small cabinet where he kept his whisky. He poured himself a three-finger measure—precise, practiced, more than he usually did, but not enough to be dramatic. No water. No ice. The amber liquid caught the light briefly before settling

He sat on the sofa, leaning forward slightly, elbows on knees, glass resting in his hand.

Aditi stayed behind for a while, clearing the kitchen. She finished the last of her work emails at the corner of the sofa she had claimed for herself, the glow of the screen casting a faint blue light on the wall. Her neck ached; she rolled it gently from side to side, stretching, eyes closed.

When she opened them, she realised Kabir was watching her. Not with hunger. Not with accusation. Just—watching.

"I love you," he said.

The words were quiet, unadorned. They did not ask for a response.

She looked up, startled—not because she didn’t believe him, but because she had not expected the moment to come like this. Without build-up. Without warning. There had been no argument, no crescendo. Just this, dropped into the room like something heavy and irrevocable.

She opened her mouth to respond, but he spoke again before she could. “I know what I want,” he said quietly.

She stayed where she was, heart beginning to beat faster.

He didn’t look at her when he continued. His gaze was fixed somewhere ahead, unfocused, as though he were watching a memory play out on the blank wall opposite

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while now,” he said. “Probably longer than I should have.” He took a sip of the whisky. Let it sit for a moment before swallowing.

“I love you desperately,” he said. “That hasn’t changed. If anything, it’s gotten worse. Deeper. More... inconvenient.” A pause. “But I’m tired, Aditi.”

That word—*tired*—carried more weight than anger ever could.

“Tired of how we live,” he went on. “Of how careful everything is. Of measuring every word, every gesture. Of pretending that this”—he gestured vaguely between them—“is sustainable.”

She felt a familiar tightness begin to gather behind her ribs.

“It’s a physical pain,” he said. “Not touching you. Not laughing with you the way we used to. Pretending that wanting you doesn’t exist.” His voice roughened, just slightly. “I feel like I’m amputating parts of myself every day just to keep the peace.”

She swallowed hard.

“I miss you,” he said. “Not the version of you I imagine when you’re not here. Not the idea of you I carry when I’m flying. *You*.”

He looked at her then. “The way you stand in the kitchen chopping vegetables,” he said. “The way you lean your hip against the counter when the tea is boiling. The way you forget what you were saying because something else has caught your attention.”

Her chest ached.

"I love this version of you," he said.

The words struck her like a physical blow. He wasn't accusing. He wasn't bitter. He was simply naming a truth

"And that's the cruel part," he added quietly. "Because this—this woman—is one who never gave me a place."

She felt tears sting unexpectedly.

"I just wish," he said, "that there was room for me in this marriage. That I wasn't standing outside my own marriage, watching you live a life I can't quite enter."

The whisky level in his glass had dropped, though he hadn't been conscious of drinking it.

"I'm a simple guy," he said. "I know that sounds ridiculous, considering my job. But I don't want complexity at home. I never have. I want a simple life with the woman I love. The woman I married with very uncomplicated hopes."

His voice dropped. "And right now, being in this marriage is hurting me. Physically. I wake up tense. I go to bed braced. I can't keep pretending this doesn't hurt."

The silence that followed felt immense, almost pressurised.

Aditi moved toward him then, slowly, as though approaching something fragile. She sat beside him, close enough that their knees touched. The contact sent a shock through her—familiar, devastating.

"I ended it," she said.

He did not react outwardly. His face remained composed, though she felt the shift in him—the way his attention sharpened, the way he grew very still.

"With Angad," she said, because clarity mattered. "I broke it off. Completely." Her voice wavered despite herself.

"Because I love you," she continued. "And because I realised that whatever I thought I was reaching for—I already had it. With you. I just didn't know how to be brave enough to stay present in it."

She took a breath. "I don't want anything else," she said. "I don't want another version of myself. I don't want another life. I want *this*. I want us. Even if we

can't go back to how it was before—if we can only find a semblance of it—I want that. With you. Long-term”

Kabir listened. He did not interrupt. He did not question. When she finished, he reached for her hand. His fingers wrapped around hers—solid, steady. Not tentative. Not demanding.

He said nothing. He finished the whisky, set the glass aside, and sat with her hand in his as though grounding himself in the reality of the moment.

Then, he reached for her as though restraint had finally failed him.

Not roughly—never that—but with a suddenness that startled them both. His hand closed around her wrist, firm and unmistakable, pulling her into him before she could say anything at all. His mouth found hers with a weight that cut off the room, the evening, the careful balance they had been maintaining for weeks.

It was not gentle. It was hungry, claiming, edged with something perilously close to desperation. She tasted the faint sweetness of whisky on his lips, felt it in the way his mouth moved against hers—not exploratory, not tentative, but searching, as though he needed proof. As though he needed to be certain she was real, that she was still here, that this wasn't another moment slipping through his fingers.

A sound escaped her before she could stop it—low, unguarded—and he answered it immediately, deepening the kiss, tightening his hold.

When they finally broke apart, they were both breathing hard, foreheads nearly touching. He didn't step back. He didn't loosen his grip.

The space between them had become intolerable.

He kissed her again almost at once, as though distance itself were a threat. This time his hands moved with intention, sliding over her back, her sides, settling briefly at her hips. He held her there for a moment—anchoring, possessive—before his hands resumed their slow, deliberate exploration. Every place he touched felt purposeful, as though he were reacquainting himself with her body after a long absence, relearning what it meant to be allowed.

It didn't soothe her. It sharpened everything.

The hunger inside her tightened, insistent and aching, and she leaned into him without thinking, her arms coming up around his shoulders, her fingers

threading into his hair. She kissed him back with equal urgency, as though if she didn't, something fragile between them might fracture again under the weight of hesitation.

"I want all of you," he said quietly, the words pressed close to her mouth.

Not demanded. Stated. A truth he was no longer willing to dilute.

There was something raw in his voice—need braided with fear, desire threaded through with the memory of how close he had come to losing this. Losing *her*. He felt it even as he said it: the dangerous clarity of wanting something you could not afford to be careless with.

He steadied himself then, the way he always did when things mattered too much. With controlled hands—almost painfully careful—he helped her out of her clothes. Fabric slipped away inch by inch, pooling at her feet. His touch lingered just long enough to make her breath catch before moving on, as though he were rationing sensation, afraid of overwhelming either of them. He never broke the kiss for long. Each time his mouth left hers, it returned quickly, insistently, as though he feared the moment might slip out of reach if he didn't keep hold of it.

When his hands returned to her skin, it was different. Warmer. Rougher. More certain.

She gasped softly as sensation rippled through her, her body responding with an ease that startled her after weeks of restraint. She arched into him without meaning to, the reaction instinctive, honest, uncalculated.

He noticed. His mouth traced a slow path along her cheek, her jaw, down the sensitive line of her neck. Each kiss felt intentional, unhurried, as though he were grounding himself through her—through the familiarity of her skin, the quiet sounds she made when she forgot to guard herself. It was not indulgence; it was anchoring.

She felt lit from within, nerves alive, every breath coming shallower than the last.

When his touch shifted—more intimate now, more deliberate—she inhaled sharply. The sensation flooded her all at once. It wasn't just pleasure. It was release. Relief. The undoing of weeks of held-back want, of nights spent measuring distance instead of closing it. Her body answered him immediately, as though it had been waiting for permission.

He buried his face briefly at the curve of her neck, his breath hot against her skin. His teeth grazed there—not biting, not hurting, just enough to make her shiver. It felt like a warning and a promise all at once.

He held her there, close—almost too close—as though he needed to remind himself that she was not slipping away. That this—*this*—was real. That she had chosen him. That he was choosing her again, fully, without reserve.

What passed between them then was not just desire. It was fear burned down into urgency. It was love sharpened by the knowledge of how easily it could fracture. It was a vow made without words, pressed into skin and breath and the quiet, unyielding way he held her as though letting go were no longer an option.

For the first time since Air Force Day—since the night everything had almost broken—Kabir allowed himself to believe that what they were rebuilding might actually hold.

But belief did not arrive cleanly.

She said she needed him, and the words carried more than urgency. They carried fear—the kind that came from having already stood on the edge of loss and knowing how little it took to fall.

Kabir bent into the curve of her neck again, his forehead resting there before his mouth followed. The contact was deliberate, lingering, almost reverent. His breath warmed her skin, familiar enough to tighten something deep in his chest. He stayed there longer than necessary, grounding himself in the fact that she was here, that this moment had not slipped past them after all.

Aditi's hands moved on instinct, but not in haste. She touched him carefully, guiding him closer, closing the distance that had haunted them for weeks. When their bodies finally aligned, the sound she made was not pleasure alone—it was relief. His breath broke against her shoulder in the same way.

He moved slowly. Too slowly.

Not to tease. Not to dominate. But because fear had taught him caution. Because rushing felt dangerous now, as though speed might shatter something fragile they had only just reached for again. Each measured movement sent sensation through her in slow, rising waves that never quite crested. It was exquisite and unbearable, desire sharpened by restraint.

She clutched at him, her fingers pressing into his shoulders, her forehead resting against his collarbone. Her body remembered him easily—too easily—but her heart lagged behind, still bruised, still wary.

Wanting him had never been the problem. Trusting that want had been.

Kabir felt the hesitation even as she held him close. It cut deeper than he expected. It reminded him that closeness did not erase memory—that intimacy could coexist with fear, that bodies could align even while doubt lingered.

When he stopped, it was not abrupt. It was intentional.

He leaned in, his mouth close to her ear, holding her there—suspended, trembling, breath shallow. Keeping her on the edge felt terrifying and intimate all at once. “You wanted long-term,” he said quietly.

The words were not about the moment alone. They carried the weight of silences, of nights spent apart in the same house, of the knowledge that love was not what had been missing.

Presence had been.

When he moved again, it was still slow, but there was less restraint now, more inevitability. Each motion sent sensation deeper, harder to ignore. She felt his breath change, felt tension build in him as well—the same struggle between control and surrender tightening his hold on her.

That knowledge undid her. She gave herself to the moment not recklessly, but fully—her body responding even as her mind clung to him, afraid of what came after. The release that followed was not just physical; it was emotional, almost painful in its intensity. Her body shook, his arms tightening around her as though he could anchor them both through it.

When it passed, he didn't pull away.

He stayed. Forehead resting against hers. Breathing slowly evening out. His hands remained warm and steady at her back—familiar in a way that was both comforting and dangerous.

But the fear did not vanish.

And for the first time in a long while, the night did not feel like something to endure.

It felt like something to rest inside.

Chapter 37

The fear had stayed.

Even held like this, Aditi knew what intimacy could not do. It could not undo months of distance. It could not erase the moments when they had chosen silence over honesty. It could not promise that they would not hurt each other again.

Kabir knew it too.

The closeness did not grant certainty. It only made the stakes clearer. This was not a return to what they had been. It was something quieter. More deliberate. More vulnerable.

A reconciliation shaped not by forgetting what had almost broken them, but by acknowledging it—and choosing, with open eyes and unguarded bodies, to try again anyway.

Later, when her breathing had evened out beside him, Kabir could not sleep.

He lay on his back, one arm folded behind his head, the other resting lightly at his side, careful not to disturb her. Aditi's breath moved in a slow, steady rhythm—deep, unguarded, the kind that told him she had crossed into real sleep, not the half-wakefulness of someone bracing for the day ahead. He listened to it the way he listened to engines after shutdown: attentive, alert for changes that might never come.

The room was dark. Familiar. *Their* room.

Nothing about it had changed in the last hour, and yet everything felt recalibrated.

Intimacy had always done this to him. Not softened him. Sharpened him.

In the immediate aftermath—when her body had finally relaxed against his and her fingers had loosened their grip—there had been a fleeting sense of relief, something close to peace. But it hadn't lasted. It never did. The moment closeness receded, his mind stepped back in, disciplined and unkind.

He replayed everything. The way she had said she needed him. The way her voice had sounded—open, stripped of defensiveness. The way she had held him—not desperately, but as if testing whether he would stay solid in her hands.

It should have reassured him. Instead, it made his chest tighten. Because need was not the same as choice. Because closeness did not mean certainty.

Because he had learned—slowly, painfully—that intimacy could coexist with distance, that bodies could come together even when trust lagged behind.

He turned his head slightly and looked at her. In sleep, Aditi looked younger. Less composed. The lines of tension she carried while awake softened, her face slack with exhaustion and something like surrender. A strand of hair had fallen across her cheek. He resisted the impulse to brush it away.

He loved her. That had never been in doubt. What frightened him was how little love protected you from damage.

He had felt it earlier, even as he held her close—the faint hesitation in the way she had responded at first, the fractional delay between touch and surrender. He knew that pause intimately now. It lived in him too.

The part that held back just enough to survive if things went wrong again. Intimacy hadn't erased it. It had illuminated it. He had wanted her—badly, instinctively—but woven through that want had been something darker: the need to reassure himself that she was still here, that she had chosen him, that this wasn't a momentary easing of guilt or fear.

The thought lodged itself in his chest, unwelcome and persistent.

He shifted slightly, careful not to wake her, and stared at the ceiling. His mind, trained for threat assessment, did what it always did when stillness allowed it room. *What if this doesn't hold? What if tonight becomes a memory she leans on instead of a foundation? What if closeness makes the eventual distance worse?*

He hated himself for thinking it. But he could not stop.

Flying had taught him that the most dangerous moments were not the dramatic ones—the obvious emergencies—but the quiet transitions. The seconds after everything seemed fine. The complacency that followed relief.

This felt like that.

He had wanted the intimacy to reassure him, to quiet the ache he had named earlier—the physical pain of distance. Instead, it had made him acutely aware of what was at stake. Of how deeply he was invested. Of how little armour he had left where she was concerned.

He turned onto his side, facing away from her. The movement was small, deliberate. Not rejection. Containment. He needed to hold himself together.

Behind him, Aditi shifted slightly, murmured something incoherent in her sleep, and settled again. The sound went through him with a tenderness so sharp it bordered on hurt.

He closed his eyes. *This fixes nothing*, he told himself quietly. *It changes nothing on its own.*

What it did do—what frightened him most—was remind him that he still wanted this badly enough to risk being broken by it.

By morning, he knew, he would be steady again. Controlled. Thoughtful. He would make space for conversation, for caution, for the slow, deliberate work of rebuilding.

But in the dark, alone with his thoughts and the echo of her body against his, Kabir allowed himself one unguarded truth: Loving her had never been the hard part. Living with the uncertainty of being loved back—in the same way, with the same endurance—that was what kept him awake.

Morning arrived without ceremony.

Light crept in through the gap in the curtains, pale and tentative, as though unsure whether it was welcome. It lay first across the floor, then climbed the wall, finally reaching the edge of the bed. The room looked unchanged—same furniture, same half-open cupboard, the chair with clothes folded neatly over its back—but something in the air had shifted.

Kabir woke before the alarm. He lay still for a moment, listening.

Aditi's breathing was slow and even beside him. Not feigned sleep. Not the shallow, alert rhythm she sometimes carried when she was awake but

pretending otherwise. This was real rest. He felt it register in his body before his mind named it—his shoulders easing just slightly, the tightness in his jaw loosening by a fraction.

He did not reach for her. Not yet.

Last night hovered at the edges of his thoughts—not as images, but as sensation. The weight of her against him. The sound she had made when she finally let go. The way she had stayed close afterward, not retreating into herself.

It had mattered. And yet—he was careful with that thought.

Beside him, Aditi stirred. She turned slightly, her arm brushing his. The contact was accidental, unguarded. She didn't pull away. Neither did he.

Her eyes opened slowly. For a moment, there was uncertainty—an almost imperceptible flicker as she took in the light, the room, the fact of him beside her. Then something softened. Her gaze settled. "Morning," she said, voice low, sleep-rough.

"Morning," he replied. No rush. No careful neutrality. Just the word.

She shifted onto her side to face him. The sheet slipped down her shoulder, unselfconscious. He noticed—and noticed that he noticed without tension, without the ache of restraint that had haunted him for weeks.

"You slept," he said.

She smiled faintly. "I think so."

That small admission—*I think so*—carried more weight than either of them acknowledged. Sleep had been elusive lately. Real sleep even more so.

They lay there for a few moments, looking at each other. Not searching. Not avoiding. Something tentative, fragile, but undeniably present threaded the silence.

Eventually, she reached out—not dramatically, just enough for her fingers to rest against his forearm. He didn't flinch.

"Tea?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "That'd be good."

She smiled again, a little more easily this time, and slipped out of bed.

Kabir watched her move around the room, the familiar choreography of someone who belonged there: tying her hair back loosely, picking up her phone and setting it down again without checking it, pausing briefly at the window as if registering the day.

In the kitchen, the kettle went on. Cups were placed on the counter. The ordinary sounds of morning resumed. He joined her a few minutes later, already dressed, movements precise but unhurried. He leaned against the counter while she poured the tea.

They stood side by side, shoulders almost touching. Almost.

She handed him a cup. Their fingers brushed. Neither commented on it. They drank in quiet companionship, the steam rising between them.

Outside, the colony was waking up—doors opening, voices carrying faintly, a scooter starting somewhere down the lane. Life, continuing as it always did, indifferent to the quiet recalibration happening in their kitchen.

Aditi took a sip of her tea and exhaled. “I have a meeting later,” she said. “Might run long.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll make dinner though.”

“No pressure. We can eat at the Mess.”

The ease of the exchange startled her. She looked at him, just briefly, as though checking that she hadn’t imagined it. “You’re flying today?” she asked.

“Yes.”

There it was. Not fear exactly—but awareness.

“Routine,” he added, before she could ask. “Nothing fancy.”

She nodded. Did not press.

They finished their tea in comfortable quiet. When it was time to leave, Kabir reached for his keys.

At the door, he hesitated. It was a small pause, but it mattered. He turned back to her. “I’ll call if I’m late.”

She met his gaze. “I’ll wait.”

No promise. No pressure. Just—*I’ll wait*.

He left with a strange, unfamiliar sensation settling in his chest. Not relief. Not certainty. Something gentler. Something like space.

At the base, the day unfolded with its usual discipline. Briefing. Weather. Aircraft availability. Nothing extraordinary. And yet Kabir felt different in the cockpit. Not distracted. Just—less braced.

He flew cleanly. Precisely. But without the overcorrection he'd been slipping into recently. The jet responded as it always had, and like always, he trusted it.

He shut down, climbed out, and stood for a moment longer than necessary on the tarmac, helmet tucked under his arm, letting the heat and noise ground him.

That evening, when he came home, Aditi was already there. She was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables. She looked up when she heard the door.

"You're early," she said.

"So are you."

She smiled. "Meeting ended on time. A miracle."

He set his bag down and washed his hands. Joined her at the counter.

"What are we making?" he asked.

"Whatever this turns into."

He picked up a carrot and began slicing without asking where anything was. They worked side by side, occasionally bumping elbows, occasionally laughing when one of them reached for the same spice at the same time.

Nothing dramatic happened. And that, somehow, felt like everything.

Later, as they sat down to eat, Kabir realised something with a quiet clarity that surprised him:

The happiness returning was not loud. It wasn't fireworks or declarations or certainty. It was this.

Shared space. Shared rhythm. The slow, careful rebuilding of trust. A beginning that no longer felt fragile.

The days that followed did not announce themselves as better. They simply happened.

Work resumed its familiar demands. Kabir flew, ran, attended briefings. Aditi disappeared into meetings and deadlines, worked but was less brittle. They shared meals without ceremony, exchanged small irritations about traffic and emails, watched half-episodes of shows neither of them particularly cared about.

There were no long conversations about *us*.

And yet, something had shifted.

They began to touch again—not deliberately, not as reassurance, but absentmindedly. A hand on the back while passing in the corridor. Fingers brushing at the sink.

At first, the intimacy startled them both. Each contact came with a momentary pause, as though they were checking whether it was allowed. Then, gradually, the pause shortened.

Laughter returned quietly. Not the careful, polite kind. The sudden bursts—the kind that surprised them mid-conversation, that left Aditi leaning against the counter, breathless, and Kabir shaking his head in mock disbelief.

One evening, Kabir came home to find her in the kitchen, kneading the dough, music playing softly from her phone.

She hadn't heard him come in.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching her sway slightly to the rhythm, mouthing words under her breath. It struck him then—not painfully, not sharply, but with a gentle clarity—that this was the version of her he had missed most. The unobserved one. The one who didn't feel watched or evaluated.

He cleared his throat lightly.

She turned, startled, then smiled. "You're home!."

"I am."

She smiled, "It's amazing how good you still look at the end of a day."

He accepted the compliment with a smile, even as he knew he was smelling faintly of bad coffee and stale simulators.

Over the next few weeks, the house learned them again.

They fell into rhythms without naming them. Morning tea. Evening walks when the weather allowed. Kabir fixing a leaky tap while Aditi handed him tools and commentary. Aditi reorganising a shelf while Kabir pretended not to notice until it was done.

They argued, too—but the arguments shifted. They were shorter. Less brittle. Less freighted with meaning.

When Kabir came home late, Aditi didn't brace herself. When Aditi was distracted, Kabir didn't immediately assume distance. They began, slowly, to give each other the benefit of doubt again. She had changed her emergency contact to his squadron duty room. He heard it but did not react.

Happiness returned the way light does in winter—not suddenly, not dramatically, but in increments so small you didn't notice until one day you realised the room was brighter.

Kabir found himself humming again without noticing. Aditi caught herself reaching for her phone to text him something trivial, then smiling when she remembered she could just tell him later.

They didn't talk about Angad.

The absence sat between them—not heavy, not pressing, but acknowledged. A door that was no longer ajar, but closed.

One night, weeks later, they lay in bed reading separate books. Kabir reached over without looking and rested his hand on her thigh. She covered it with hers.

Neither of them spoke. It was enough.

Neither of them believed, anymore, in neat resolutions. They knew too much for that. But they were learning—again—that happiness didn't always arrive as certainty.

Sometimes it arrived as comfort. As ease. As the quiet, ongoing decision to stay.

And without quite noticing when it happened, they began to feel—tentatively, carefully—that they were no longer rebuilding from rubble. They were simply living.

Chapter 38

The wedding of a cousin in Delhi was the first time they had stepped out of the protective cocoon of the airbase. It was a world of marigolds strung in extravagant excess, of rose petals crushed into carpets, of lights hung so thickly they turned night into a staged twilight. Music swelled and collapsed in waves—shehnai giving way to DJ remixes, tradition yielding to spectacle. It was beautiful, undeniably so. It was also deeply tiring.

Aditi realised, with faint surprise, how much she now recoiled from environments that demanded constant emotional output. Here, every interaction felt performative. Laughter arrived on cue. Compliments were sharpened into comparisons. Conversations circled endlessly around status—who had married whom, which city someone had moved to, how much something must have cost. She had once navigated such rooms with ease, even pleasure. Tonight, it felt like walking through heavy air.

She stayed close to Kabir's side—not clinging, not hiding, simply orienting herself by him the way one does instinctively toward true north. He looked striking in his white kurta, its lines clean, almost severe. The tailoring emphasised nothing unnecessarily. His posture carried the easy discipline of a man who spent his life defying gravity and returning from it intact.

He did not scan the room for approval. He didn't need to. People noticed him anyway. Not with the curiosity reserved for wealth or glamour, but with the instinctive awareness one has of competence. Men straightened when speaking to him. Women glanced twice, then looked away, uncertain why they had. Girls giggled about the “ultra-handsome” pilot. Boys invented reasons to talk to him.

He was polite without being ingratiating, present without being performative. Aditi watched him greet other cousins, nephews and nieces, the occasional civilian who asked polite questions about “flying jets” with a smile that revealed nothing he didn’t wish to give—each interaction brief, precise, complete. Aditi saw him—how he listened more than he spoke, how he never interrupted, how he disengaged without offence. There was no performance in him. No need to dominate a room that already bent around his presence.

He was quieter than usual. Not withdrawn—just observant. His hand found the small of her back often, a light pressure, grounding rather than claiming. Each time, she felt the question beneath it—*You okay? Still with me?* Each time, Aditi answered by leaning into him just enough to say yes.

They made their way through congratulations and small talk. Kabir greeted other cousins, nephews and nieces, the occasional civilian who asked polite questions about “flying jets” with a smile that revealed nothing he didn’t wish to give. Aditi watched him closely—how he listened more than he spoke, how he never interrupted, how he disengaged without offence. There was no performance in him. No need to dominate a room that already bent around his presence.

The encounter happened near the bar, during the chaotic transition between the ceremony and the dinner—when the lights softened, the music shifted, and everyone seemed briefly untethered, unsure of where to stand or whom to speak to next.

Kabir had gone to fetch her a drink—gin and tonic, remembered without asking—when a shadow fell across Aditi’s path.

"You look beautiful, Aditi. But you look like you’re holding your breath."

She knew the voice before she turned. Her body registered it faster than her mind, not with shock or longing. With a tired clarity, like recognising an old habit one has finally outgrown.

Angad.

He looked exactly as he always had—polished, effortless, a suit chosen to signal taste rather than conformity. His smile arrived on cue, calibrated, familiar. Once, it had felt like home. Now it felt like a well-rehearsed performance delivered to the wrong audience.

"I'm fine, Angad," she said evenly.

She didn't step away, but she didn't step closer either. She felt a strange, detached clinicality settle over her, as if she were observing a specimen under glass. She noticed, distantly, how her body remained relaxed. No tightening. No anticipatory defence. This, she realised dimly, was what distance felt like—not absence, but clarity.

"He's not right for you," Angad said, stepping into her personal space, lowering his voice to that intimate register he had always mistaken for depth. "I saw him earlier. He's cold. He treats you like a subordinate, not a wife."

Aditi held his gaze, searching—not for truth, but for relevance. She watched him speak, noticing details she once ignored—the rehearsed cadence, the certainty with which he narrated her life back to her.

"You're a woman of fire," he continued, warming to his script. "Why are you settling for a man who lives in a cockpit and speaks in checklists?"

Aditi looked at him. She waited for the old flutter of conflict, the spark of 'what if.' It never came. Instead, she felt a profound, almost startling, boredom.

"You don't know him at all," she said quietly.

"I know his type," Angad scoffed, over her shoulder.

Kabir was walking back toward them now, her glass in hand, his stride unhurried.

"The stoic hero," Angad went on. "It's a mask, Aditi. Behind it, there's nothing but ego and a set of flight hours. He can't give you a life. He can only give you a schedule."

Kabir arrived then. He didn't tense. He didn't demand an explanation. He simply handed Aditi her glass without interruption. Their fingers brushed. The contact was unremarkable—and profoundly reassuring.

His presence cooled the air. The space seemed to recalibrate around him.

Angad didn't back down; he doubled down. "I was just telling Aditi that some men are built for the sky because they aren't substantial enough for the earth," he said, his smile sharpened now, brittle. "Must be hard, Kabir, knowing you're only interesting when you're three thousand feet up."

Kabir looked at him then. Not with anger. Not with contempt.

With the same detached, analytical gaze he used to scan an instrument panel during a malfunction. He saw the insecurity. The petty hunger for reaction. The smallness of the provocation.

"I think we're done here," Kabir said. His voice held no heat or bravado. There was no emphasis, no threat. Just finality and closure.

He didn't wait for a rebuttal. He turned to Aditi instead, offering his arm as if this were the most ordinary decision in the world. "Shall we find our table?"

She looked at Angad one last time and understood, fully, what had ended. Not a relationship—but an illusion. She saw the way his face twisted—not with rage, but frustration. The frustration of a man who had arrived armed for a duel and found no opponent willing to fight him. She saw, with sudden, piercing clarity, the boyishness she had once mistaken for charm. The way he mistook intensity for intimacy. Noise for depth. Performance for presence.

She turned away.

They walked off together, Kabir's hand settling once more at the small of her back, steady and sure, leaving Angad standing amid the scent of expensive perfume and dying flowers—a ghost who had finally realised he was no longer haunting anyone.

Later that night, the noise of the wedding was a distant hum below their hotel room, muffled by height and thick curtains. The city glowed faintly beyond the window, Delhi laid out in amber and shadow.

Aditi realised something else had shifted. There was no aftertaste. No echo. The past had not followed them upstairs.

The heavy jewellery was off. The silk sari lay draped over a chair, suddenly just fabric again. The air was cool and quiet.

Aditi was sitting on the edge of the bed, unpinning her hair, when she caught Kabir's eye in the mirror. He was loosening his collar, a small, tugging smirk on his face.

"What?" she asked, a smile tugging at her own lips.

"Substantial enough for the earth," Kabir quoted, shaking his head. "I've had debriefs from flight cadets that were more intimidating than that. He actually practiced that line before he said it, didn't he?"

Aditi let out a genuine, startled laugh—the kind that surprised her with its ease. "He probably did. He always did love his own dialogue."

"He called me a 'stoic hero,'" Kabir added, sitting down beside her. "I think he's been watching too many old movies. Does he think I spend my nights staring at the moon and brooding about my 'calling'?"

"He thinks you're a stereotype because he can't imagine a man who doesn't need to be the loudest person in the room," Aditi said. She leaned into him, her head falling onto his shoulder. "He's so... juvenile, Kabir. I can't believe I ever let him make me feel small."

"He's a closed chapter," Kabir said, his voice serious now, but soft. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her into the familiar shelter of his body. "For both of us."

Aditi nodded, feeling something uncoil inside her—something that had been tight for far too long.

The ghost wasn't just gone. It had been laughed out of the room. It had no power because it had no substance.

They lay back together, the large hotel bed feeling intimate and safe. There was no need for grand declarations or deep excavations of the past tonight. The air between them was clear.

Kabir pulled the duvet over them, and Aditi curled into him, her back to his chest, his heartbeat steady and familiar against her spine. For the first time in a year, there was no third person in the room. No memory of Angad, no shadow of a broken vow.

Just two people who had survived a crash and were finally, peacefully, at rest.

They slept curled into each other, a single, unbroken line in the dark. For a long while, neither of them spoke.

The city outside moved in distant fragments—an occasional horn, a burst of laughter, the muted thud of music carried upward and softened by glass and height. Inside the room, there was only the slow, shared rhythm of breathing. Kabir's arm rested around her with the unconscious certainty of habit, not a gesture chosen, but one that existed because it always had.

Aditi stared into the dark, aware of how unremarkable her thoughts felt. There was no replaying of Angad's face, no retrospective arguments, no imagined

alternate endings. The absence itself felt significant. The mind, she realised, grows quiet only when it has finally stopped negotiating with the past.

Kabir shifted slightly behind her, his chin brushing the crown of her head. Not a question. Not a check. Just presence.

She reached back and threaded her fingers into his, anchoring herself to the warmth of his hand. The contact was simple, uncharged, deeply intimate. It carried no promise beyond continuity—and somehow, that was enough.

Tomorrow, there would be flights and briefings, luggage and departures, the familiar rhythm of a life shaped by orders and schedules. But tonight existed outside all of that.

Tonight, there was no before and no after.

Only this: two bodies aligned, unguarded, resting in the certainty that what had survived did not need defending anymore.

Epilogue

The mornings at Hashimara arrived quietly.

Mist rose from the tree line beyond the runway, softening the sharp edges of the base until even the hardened shapes of shelters and hangars seemed to breathe. The mountains held themselves at a distance—present, watchful, never intrusive. It was a landscape that asked for steadiness, not bravado.

Kabir liked that.

He stood on the small verandah outside the married quarters, coffee cooling in his hand, listening to the sounds that now defined his life. Not the whine of engines—those would come later—but softer things first. The thud of small feet on tiled floors. An argument unfolding over who had stolen whose socks. Aditi's voice, low and firm, threading order into chaos.

"Papa," one of the boys called, half-command, half-plea. "He's not listening."

Kabir smiled without turning.

"That," he said mildly, raising his voice just enough to carry, "is because he's four."

The reply—identical in tone, if not in pitch—came instantly. "I'm six."

"And all of you," Aditi cut in, amused but resolute, "are late."

That settled it. Kabir finished his coffee, set the cup down, and stepped inside.

The house bore the marks of long habitation now—not the careful sparseness of their first quarters, not the tentative arrangements of a couple still learning how to share space. Toys occupied corners with complete authority. Crayon drawings—aircraft with impossible proportions, mountains coloured purple, a

sun that smiled—were taped to walls with the seriousness of official documents. A school bag lay abandoned by the door, its contents spilling like secrets.

Aditi stood at the dining table, tying a shoelace with practised efficiency. She looked up when Kabir entered, meeting his eyes with the easy familiarity of someone who no longer needed to ask how he was.

She knew. She always did.

Wing Commander Kabir Mehra.

The rank still surprised him sometimes—not because he hadn't earned it, but because of what it had taken away even as it had given. He flew less now. Not by much—he insisted on staying current, insisted on knowing his aircraft with the same intimacy as the men he commanded—but the flying no longer belonged only to him. Every sortie carried the weight of example. Every decision echoed beyond the cockpit.

Command had changed him. It had stripped away whatever remnants of impatience he had once possessed. It had taught him that calm was not an instinct but a discipline, renewed daily. That leadership was not presence in the air alone, but patience on the ground—in briefings, in debriefs, in listening to young pilots who mistook silence for certainty.

At Hashimara, the squadron trusted him.

They knew his reputation before they knew his habits. TACDE. WAC. Sukhoi. Combat. Flypasts. The quiet authority that came not from raising his voice but from never needing to. He brought all of it with him—and left something behind too. The need to prove himself.

Aditi had watched the transition with a kind of wonder.

Base life suited her in ways she hadn't expected. The rhythms were familiar now—the early mornings, the absences that came with little explanation, the unspoken understanding that some days were heavier than others. She found purpose easily. School committees. Welfare meetings. Evenings that unfolded into long conversations on other verandahs, children drifting between homes as though the base were one extended family.

She belonged here.

There had been a time, years ago, when she hadn't been sure what belonging would look like. When happiness had felt fragile, borrowed. Now it was

ordinary in the best way—woven into routines, into shared glances, into the quiet confidence of a life built deliberately.

Later that morning, the boys stood by the fence near the apron, their hands wrapped tightly around the wire, eyes wide as the aircraft rolled out. Aditi stood behind them, one hand resting lightly on each small shoulder.

Kabir walked past in his flight suit, helmet tucked under his arm. He paused when he saw them, lifting a hand in a brief, familiar gesture. Not a wave. A signal.

The children responded with solemn seriousness, mimicking him as best they could.

Aditi laughed, the sound carried away by the breeze.

Kabir turned toward the aircraft then, toward the day's responsibilities, toward a role that asked everything of him and still demanded more. But he went lighter than he once had. Anchored.

Somewhere between Ambala and Hashimara, between grief and trust and recommitment, he had learned this: That flying was no longer the thing that defined him.

It was simply one part of a life that had found its balance.

When the engines roared to life and the Sukhoi lifted cleanly into the sky, Aditi did not hold her breath the way she once had. She watched, steady, as the aircraft became a shape against the mountains and then something smaller still.

The boys waved long after it disappeared.

And the morning, like so many now, carried on.