

**April 2017**



Aaira was up for her prayers but stayed in her room and waited for dawn. At sunrise, she quietly opened the door and looked down the hall. The house was silent at this hour; everyone was still asleep. She slowly walked towards the kitchen, trying not to make any sound that would wake someone in the house. There stood Mehmet near the stove, pouring Çay<sup>1</sup> for himself.

“İyi sabahlar<sup>2</sup> ! You are up early,” he said, taking out another cup for Aaira.

She gently took the tea from his hands and sipped it in silence, her eyes searching his over the rim.

He sat across from her, sipping his Çay, gazing at her as she held her warm cup close to her lips and took another sip. Every cell in his body wanted to go across the table, hold her close, and never let go of her.

“Hey, you want to sneak out for a walk?” he whispered. She nodded.

They quietly left the house for a refreshing morning walk down the narrow streets, among the traditional stone houses with colorful window shutters and bright pink bougainvillea. Walking side by side, they both felt an unexplored intimacy between them.

The streets were quiet at this time of the day, but soon these narrow-cobbled streets would live again with people from all walks of life. They both relished this quietness, a seductive

<sup>1</sup> Turkish for tea

<sup>2</sup> Good morning

silence between them.

With most of the town still asleep, they found one café open in the corner. Mehmet ordered warm Kahvesi for both of them, accompanied by a piece of Revani - a simple dessert made with a single layer of soft, yellow semolina sponge cake, steeped in lots of sugar syrup.

“Mehmet, I will leave just after the wedding. I have a flight tomorrow. I want to be in Istanbul a little early,” said Aaira.

Mehmet didn't reply and kept sipping his coffee.

“But I will miss this place. Thank you for making these few days memorable for me. Every memory with you has a taste, smell, and texture,” said Aaira, putting the last crumbs of Revani in her mouth.

Mehmet kept quiet and just gazed at her.

They sat in silence, looking at their coffee cups, trying to find words to say goodbye, but no words could express their feelings for each other.

Finally, Mehmet looked up and said, “Will I ever see you again, Aaira?”

She kept quiet; she had no answer to give.

## One



*12 months back, Karachi, Pakistan 2016*

It had been about thirty minutes since the break of dawn. Aaira slipped the shades aside and slid the window ajar so the breeze could blow through her clammy hair. Her heart was pulsing fast; sweat drops advanced from her brow to her neck. She took a couple of full breaths to calm her pulse. She had just been running on the treadmill for thirty minutes, but the exhaustion she felt was from years of yearning.

Today they would be celebrating her son's twenty-fifth birthday. Merab had grown up to be a fine gentleman. He was just two years of age when she had moved back to her parents' home. It had been a long journey, and for most of it, she was distant towards everyone else as she enclosed all of her desires around her child. It's hard to keep up with the expectations of people you love while surviving in a society that disapproves of freedom.

She decided it was best to live her life through her son.

Aaira had built walls and indurated to keep out the sadness and pain, yet those same walls kept out the joy. She'd been ignoring her wants for such a long time, and this led to her waking up every morning in tears and spending most evenings weeping late into the night; all for reasons, she wouldn't even admit to herself.

Aaira remained by the window for a few seconds,

appreciating the serene time she needed to herself; when she could breathe out and set herself up for another testing day. She had been doing it for the past twenty years and would continue.

She meandered toward the kitchen, where a red kettle on the stove was already boiling for her morning tea. She took out a tea bag from one of the three jade ceramic jars on the counter and poured the steamy water into her mug, adding two spoons of milk and no sugar. This was how she enjoyed her tea: strong and bitter.

She was thankful for the silence in the house. This short-lived pleasure of hers would soon be over as other people in her house began waking up.

Aaira lived in her small house with her son Merab and her aging parents, Raheela and Muzaffar. She was the eldest sibling, and her younger brother Waleed lived in a separate house with his spouse and children.

Her peacetime was quickly disturbed when her mom came walking towards the kitchen.

Like every morning, no greetings were exchanged. “Where is my tea and lemon water,” her mother asked.

Aaira took out a tall glass from a rack in the kitchen and rapidly poured the water from the pot. Picked a ripe lemon from a little container set on the left counter of the kitchen, sliced it down the middle, and forcefully squeezed the juice from it. She presented the glass before her mom, trying her best not to make eye contact or smile; why tempt her mother to friendship? She turned towards the stove to make two cups of tea, one for her mom, and the other one for Muzaffar Sahib - the name her mother called her father.

## Two



With his phone in his grip, Merab left his room and stepped towards his mother. He delicately kissed her brow. Aaira grinned at him tenderly; her eyes sparkling with pride.

Once the phone call was over, Aaira gave Merab a tight hug; the only physical touch she had felt in years. It has always been her and Merab against the world.

“Happy birthday, Meero,” she smiled with a tear trapped in the corner of her eye.

“Thank you, Mom,” he smiled. “Make sure you are at Hurleys on time. I have to pick up Haniya. Her parents will meet us there. Please don’t tell Nano about it,” he whispered while carefully looking around the room.

“I will be there on time. Don’t worry, Merab. Though, I am a little nervous to see Haniya’s parents; you know I am not good at making conversation. What will I say to them?” There was a dash of nervousness in her voice.

Merab held his mother’s hand. “Mom, you will be fine. I should be the nervous one, not you,” he said with a wink. They both laughed.

Haniya and Merab were college sweethearts. Once they both completed their studies, Merab found a job at a local bank and Haniya in a cosmetic firm. Merab’s birthday was being used as an excuse for the parents to officially meet, settle the formalities, and decide the proceedings of a marriage

ceremony for the two lovestruck kids.

Aaira had met Haniya's parents before; once at Merab and Haniya's graduation ceremony, and then at a dinner hosted by friends. However, on both occasions, Aaira's conversations with Haniya's parents had been brief. Today would be different. She needed to take charge and ask Haniya's parents for their daughter's hand for her son. But there was one question she has dreaded being asked for years—what happened to Merab's dad?