

A Mysterious Conversation

There was the sound of a vehicle coming to a halt, the crunch of gravel under heavy wheels, and the sound of a horse's hooves stamping heavily on the ground. Shaheena opened the window and looked out, but could see nothing on account of the darkness that enveloped the grounds of the bungalow. She had given instructions for the porch light to be kept burning all night, but the servants seemed to have ignored her orders. She moved away from the window, determined to fight it out with her mother tonight.

For the past several nights, Begum Irshadhad been coming home very late, using the horse and carriage instead of the car for her nocturnal excursions. It was unusual enough that she was staying out so late, let alone using the carriage, which no one had never seen her ride before. It was Shaheena who had a penchant for using the carriage; she often rode it in the evenings for pleasure.

Shaheena left her room and walked through a corridor to the outer verandah. Someone was stepping onto the verandah from the porch. She could see nothing more than a vague shadow against the background of dim starlight.

"Who's there?" Shaheena's voice was trembling.

The shadow stopped moving.

“Who’s there? Answer, or... or I’ll shoot!” she bluffed.

“Shaheena?” came a low, hoarse voice.

“Mummy? Mummy, is that you?”

The shadow passed her and disappeared into the dark corridor. Shaheena followed the shadow into a room, where the lights were switched on—by her mother.

Begum Irshad was wrapped from head to foot in a dark cloak; only the upper part of her face was visible. She did not look her daughter in the eye. Her lips were cracked and dry, and her face was pale.

“Mummy! I’m shocked...” Shaheena said quietly.

“Oh, it’s nothing, you know. I... I just had to go out on an important errand.”

“But you never used to take the horse and carriage.”

“Just a whim, I suppose.”

“And I can’t help but notice, you’ve been coming home very late these days.”

“Go to bed. Go; this isn’t any of your business,” Begum Irshad said, irritated.

“If I didn’t come until nine o’clock at night, you would make it your business.”

“Go to bed, child. Leave me alone, for God’s sake.”

“I’ve also noticed that you’ve been looking nervous and worried for several days now.”

“Shaheena, please go to your room, dear. I don’t feel well enough for this discussion at the moment.”

“What is it that you’re hiding from me, Mummy? I don’t think you’ve ever kept secrets from me before.”

“Secrets? I have no secrets from you, dear girl. Actually, the truth is... I think it’s just nervous tension.” As soon as she said this, the harassed look disappeared from Begum Irshad’s face; she appeared calmer now that she had found a plausible excuse for her strange behaviour. She drew a deep breath and went on, “Sometimes staying