

Whispering Echos

Unseen, Unheard, Unbroken...

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Dedicated to

Ma and Papa

Acknowledgment:

Writing this novel has been a journey of the heart—woven with emotions, moments of doubt, and the quiet joy of creation. Along the way, I have been carried by love, faith, and encouragement, both near and far.

To Ma and Papa—though you are no longer here, your love and blessings remain the quiet strength within me. Every page I write carries a part of you. This book is, in many ways, for you.

To my dearest Kiran—my partner in life and in patience. Your love, faith, and quiet endurance gave me the space to dream and the courage to pursue it.

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To **my readers**—this story now belongs to you. May it find a special place in your heart and stay with you long after the last page is turned.

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Chapter 1: The Watchful Eye – A Security Guard's Perspective

People think I'm invisible. Just another uniform standing by the gate; logging car numbers, nodding at morning walkers, or, pretending not to notice the Sketchy late-night returns. But, let me tell you something—when you spend your days watching people, you observe more than they'd like you to notice.

Take **Sakshi Madam**, for example. Walks like she owns the world, but if you pay attention, you'll notice the way her shoulders tighten, before she enters her own house. A warzone wrapped in expensive curtains. Her husband, **Vikram Sir**, is one of those men who can dismiss a person at a single glance. Their daughter? Can't be bothered enough to look up from her phone. Funny, isn't it? The whole city knows Sakshi's name, but in her own house, she's just another person trying to be seen.

Then, there's **Poonam Madam**, the picture-perfect wife, a stellar mother. The kind of a woman who makes everything run so smoothly that nobody ever wonders how she makes it work. As when it comes to her husband, **Mahesh Sir**, he doesn't even have to say anything—she already knows what's expected of her. Her son, **Arjun**, is different, though. Smart boy, a bit tongue-tied around his father, but I've seen him play the guitar on his balcony, lost in his own world. And then there's his secret—I see the way he looks at the girl next door.

Ah, the **young girl in 402**. A lawyer-in-the-making, trapped in her flat because of the lockdown. She thinks she's independent, and maybe she is. But, an autonomy of that kind gets lonely, doesn't it? She talks a lot to **Sangeeta**, the maid. That woman—now she's a character. A sharp tongue, a sharper brain. Sometimes I wonder if she's the smartest person in this entire building.

And, then, there's **me**—watching it all unfold. People don't know much about me, but, like any other, I have my own secrets too. Like, the person I'm always on the phone with. Not that anyone asks. After all, I'm just the guy who opens the gate.

Oh, and let's not forget **Mr. Sharma**, the society committee head. The man treats the building like his personal kingdom, issuing fines for ridiculous things—“Unauthorized Drying of Clothes on Balcony,”

“Excessive Noise from Unapproved Musical Instruments,” and his latest favorite, “Non-Vegetarian Smells Drifting into the Hallway.”

Then, there’s **Mrs. Kapoor**, the self-appointed moral police of the society, who keeps a sharp eye on the young girl in 402. “Girls staying alone,” she often tells anyone who will listen, “not good for our culture.” I’ve caught her peeking into the girl’s apartment under the guise of “checking on her well-being” more than once. The poor girl has started avoiding eye contact in the elevator.

I swear, if these people put half as much effort into their own lives as they do into controlling others, this place would be a lot quieter.



Chapter 2: Sakshi – The Corporate Powerhouse with a Crumbling Home

Sakshi adjusted her blazer, glancing at her reflection in the mirror. The woman staring back was everything she had worked for—polished, powerful, and respected. Yet, behind that perfect façade was a silent war. The boardroom was easier to navigate than her home, where Vikram, her husband, wielded subtle dismissals sharper than any corporate back and forth. Their teenage daughter barely acknowledged her. **Was this success? Or, just another carefully curated illusion?**

As she stepped out, her phone buzzed—a message from her boss demanding an urgent meeting. Another day, another battle to prove herself. She sighed, squared her shoulders, and walked out. The world only respected winners.

At dinner that night, she placed her laptop on the table, still indulged with emails. Vikram sighed dramatically.

"Do you ever log off from work?" he asked, half-smirking.
"Or, is your office your real family now?"

Their daughter giggled and added. "Mom's married to her laptop. We should start calling it Dad."

Sakshi forced a smile. "Yeah, at least the laptop listens."

Her daughter rolled her eyes. Vikram smirked. Sakshi chewed her food in silence, wondering if there was a version of her life where she didn't have to fight for basic respect in her own home.



Chapter 3:

Poonam – The Homemaker Nobody Sees

The sound of a steel plate clattering onto the dining table broke the morning silence. Poonam placed breakfast in front of Mahesh, who didn't even glance up from his phone. Her teenage son, Arjun, muttered a soft "thanks" before rushing off to his room. At least he remotely acknowledged her.

She picked up her diary and ran her fingers over the pages filled with words she would never say aloud. Writing was the only place she existed. As her real world had stopped noticing her long back.

Mahesh cleared his throat. "Poonam, the house is fine, right? Everything is in place?"

She gave a small nod, knowing what he really meant: *You are in place, right? Not thinking too much, not asking too much?*

Later, Arjun lingered near the kitchen as she washed the dishes. “Mom,” he said hesitantly, “have you ever wanted to do something else?”

She paused, glancing at him. “What do you mean?”

“Like... besides this. Cooking, cleaning, being here.”

Poonam smiled wistfully. “Once upon a time.”

Arjun hesitated, then nodded. “You should write that book you always talk about.”

She blinked in surprise, and by the time her head turned in a hopeful abyss towards her son only walking away.



Chapter 4:

Sangeeta –

The Sarcastic Survivor

Sangeeta kicked the door open with a practiced motion, balancing a bag of vegetables in one hand and her three-year-old daughter on the other hip.

“Ah, the queen has arrived,” she announced, dumping the bag on the counter. “What a life, Rajesh Kumar ji, drinking yourself to sleep while your wife runs five households.”

Her husband grunted from the corner, too deep in his alcohol-induced haze to retort. Good. That meant less trouble today.

Her workday would start soon—Sakshi’s house first, then Poonam’s, then the young girl’s flat. Ah, that girl—so smart, so naïve. Sangeeta had taken a liking to her. Maybe, because the girl actually *listened*. Unlike the rest of these so-called educated people who thought they were better than her.

She sighed, kissing her daughter's forehead. "One day, *beta*, we'll get out of here." She wasn't sure how, but she would.



Chapter 5:

The Young Girl – Stuck Between Ambition and Love

The lockdown had trapped her in a house she barely called home. A young ambitious girl from Jabalpur, who moved to Mumbai a couple of years back. Currently working at a law firm. It was just a rented flat, a temporary space between her past and her dreams. But now, with everything shut down, she was stuck. No courtrooms, no office gossip, just endless Zoom calls and silent evenings.

Except for Sangeeta.

And Mrs. Kapoor, the society's self-appointed moral police. Who now seemed to think keeping an eye on her was part of her duties.

And Arjun. Who made her question things she wasn't ready to answer.

Maybe, she wasn't as alone as she thought.



Chapter 6: The Society Scandal – Mr. Sharma's Latest Crusade

Mr. Sharma was fuming. He stormed into the society's WhatsApp group with his usual dramatic flair:

Mr. Sharma: "URGENT! A highly inappropriate piece of clothing has been found on the common balcony railing. This is a family society, not some cheap lodge! Immediate action required. Who is responsible?"

The chat exploded.

Mrs. Kapoor: "Disgraceful! I saw it too. Pink in color. Clearly not from a *sanskaari* household."

Young Girl (402): "You guys are fighting over a piece of cloth?"

Sangeeta: "If anyone finds my husband's underwear, return it. He has one pair left."

Just as things were cooling down, Mr. Sharma launched into his next crisis: the **mysterious tiffin deliveries**.

“I have been observing strange food deliveries at odd hours,” he declared. “Someone is running an ILLEGAL home kitchen. Health hazard! I demand an immediate investigation.”

Sakshi rolled her eyes in her apartment. Poonam sighed. And the security guard? He just muted the group and went back to his phone call.

Because honestly, this building had *real* problems. And none of them were floating underwear.



Chapter 7:

Poonam's Silent Storm

Poonam had mastered the art of silence. It wasn't fear—no, she had long made peace with the fact that Mahesh's presence filled up every inch of space in their home. It was simply easier this way. Less conflict. Less disappointment.

But sometimes, late at night, when the house was quiet, she would hear Arjun strumming his guitar. Soft melodies that drifted through the walls, unspoken words hidden between the notes. He was like her—silent when it mattered, loud only in places where it was safe.

Arjun knew his mother's unhappiness, though they never spoke about it. But, what more could he do? He wasn't brave enough to challenge his father, and Poonam wasn't reckless enough to dream of a change. And yet, deep down, she hoped. Hoped that Arjun would choose differently when his time came.



Chapter 8:

A Walk Under the Stars

It started with a chance encounter in the elevator. The young girl from 402 and Arjun, two people who had exchanged nothing more than fleeting glances, now, trapped in a metal box with an uncomfortable silence.

“You always carry your guitar around?” she asked, breaking the ice.

Arjun shrugged. “Only when I need an escape.”

Later that night, they crossed paths again in the garden. A quiet place, away from prying eyes and moral policing. They walked side by side, their words careful at first, then bolder.

“Do you ever feel like you’re living someone else’s expectations?” she asked.

Arjun chuckled, kicking a stray pebble. “Every single day.”

She nodded. “Me too.”

And just like that, a bond was formed—not in declarations or dramatic confessions, but in the quiet understanding of two people trying to find their place in a world that had already decided who they should be.



Chapter 9: Late–Night Conversations with Sangeeta

The next evening, over a cup of tea, the young girl found herself pouring her thoughts out to Sangeeta. The maid listened, stirring her tea with slow deliberation.

“So, you like the boy?” Sangeeta smirked.

The girl rolled her eyes. “It’s not about that. We’re just... talking.”

“Ah, the infamous talking. That’s how it starts.”

She sighed. “He’s different. He gets it. But, we both have our own dreams. What if we have to choose?”

Sangeeta snorted. “*Beta*, choosing love over dreams is foolish. Choosing dreams over love is lonely. The trick is finding someone who will walk with you, not ahead or behind.”

The girl looked at her, surprised. “That’s...innately wise.”

Sangeeta winked. “What, you think wisdom is only for rich people? Now drink your tea.”



Chapter 10:

Poonam's Breaking Point

The morning began like any other. Poonam made breakfast, packed Mahesh's lunch, and ensured Arjun had everything he needed for his online classes. But, something felt different. She was exhausted—not physically, but emotionally. The weight of being unseen, unheard, had reached a breaking point.

When Mahesh dismissed her suggestion about renovating the house, saying, "Why waste money? Just keep it clean," something inside her snapped.

"That's all I do, isn't it? Keep things clean."

Mahesh barely looked up. "What?"

Poonam exhaled. "Nothing."

But, as she wiped down the spotless counter, her hands trembled. Was this all her life would ever be? A quiet

existence in the background, maintaining order for others?

That evening, as she stood by the kitchen window, staring out at nothing in particular, Arjun's voice drifted from the balcony.

"Ma?"

She turned. He was holding his guitar, hesitation in his eyes. "Want to hear something new I wrote?"

She nodded, sitting beside him as he strummed a gentle tune. The music filled the silence, filling the spaces she had long stopped trying to walk.

For the first time in years, she let herself listen. And, for the first time in years, someone was playing just for her.

खोई पहचान

मैं कौन हूँ, ये सवाल अब तक,

आईने में धुंधला सा दिखता है।

कभी किसी की माँ, कभी किसी की पत्नी,

पर मेरा नाम कहाँ लिखा है?

घर की दीवारों मेरी बातें सुनती,

पर जवाब कभी नहीं देती हैं।

सिलवटों में छुपी मेरी ख्वाहिशें,

रातों में करवटें बदलती हैं।

खुशी के रंगों से हाथ रंगे थे,
अब बस चूल्हे की कालिख रह गई।
खुद को समेटते-समेटते,
मैं खुद ही कहीं खो गई।
पर ये धुन, जो तू बजा रहा है,
[स]में कहीं मेरी सिसकियाँ हैं।
तेरी उंगलियों के [त] तारों में,
मेरे अधूरे सपनों की झलकियाँ हैं।

Lost Identity

Who am I?
The mirror clouds over,
its silence giving nothing back.
I am someone's mother,
someone's wife,
someone who holds a place in others' stories—
but where is my own name?
The walls have listened
to every word I never said,
and yet they stay unmoved.
My wishes hide in the folds of routine,
tossing and turning at night
like children who cannot sleep.
Once, my hands carried color—

bright stains of joy,
laughter that lingered.
Now, only soot,
a memory of fire.
Each day I gather the pieces of myself,
carefully, desperately,
and in that effort,
I vanish a little more.
But then—
in the music you play,
I hear myself again.
Each note quivers with the weight
of unfinished dreams,
each string carries a breath
I thought I had lost.
For a moment,
I almost remember
who I was.



Chapter 11: Sangeeta's Morning Chaos and a Conversation with Poonam

Sangeeta's morning had already been an epic battle. Between her mother-in-law demanding tea like a queen, her husband "misplacing" his wallet for the tenth time this month, and her son refusing to wake up for online classes, she was ready to commit murder.

She reached Poonam's house in a huff, slamming her bag down. "*Didi*, I swear, if I ever run away, it will be to a house where no one asks me where the salt is!"

Poonam smiled faintly. "Tough morning?"

Sangeeta rolled her eyes. "All mornings are tough. But, tell me, *Didi*, why do we do it? Serve and serve until we're empty?"

Poonam stirred her tea. "Because we're expected to."

Sangeeta sighed. "And what if, one day, we just don't?"

Poonam looked at her, the question hanging in the air. A question she had never dared to ask herself before.

Just then, Arjun entered, guitar in hand. He raised an eyebrow at the intensity in the room. "What's going on?"

Sangeeta smirked. "Philosophy session."

Arjun leaned against the wall. "You know, *Maa*, sometimes expectations are just stories we've been told. Doesn't mean we have to keep reading the same chapter."

Poonam met his gaze, something stirring inside her. Maybe, just maybe, it was time for a different story.

Outside, the security guard watched as another day began in this strange little world.



Chapter 12:

A Father and Son

Arjun sat on the balcony, his guitar resting against the chair. The night air was cool, but his mind was restless. His father, Mahesh, stepped outside, an unusual occurrence. They rarely shared space unless absolutely necessary.

“You’ve been sitting here a lot lately,” Mahesh said, lighting a cigarette. “Too much free time?”

Arjun smirked. “Something like that.”

Mahesh exhaled, watching the smoke disappear into the dark. “Music won’t take you far. You should be focusing on things of more substance.”

Arjun clenched his jaw. “And, what is that?”

His father didn’t answer immediately. “A stable career. A good life.”

“Your version of a good life?” Arjun asked, leaning closer, his gaze fixed on his father with unblinking curiosity. Mahesh’s lips curled into a dry smile. “My version pays the bills.”

Silence hung between them, thick with things left unsaid.

Arjun strummed a few notes absentmindedly. “You know, *Maa* writes poetry.”

Mahesh snorted. “Poetry doesn’t change reality.”

“No,” Arjun said softly. “But sometimes, it helps us survive it.”

For the first time in years, Mahesh looked at his son—not as a boy, but as someone who had seen things he had never spoken about. Someone who understood more than he should.

Mahesh took another drag of his cigarette. “Just don’t waste your potential, Arjun.”

Arjun nodded but, in retrospect, didn’t respond. He picked up his guitar and played a tune, not for his father, not even for himself—just for the silence between them, filling the spaces that words never could.



Chapter 13:

Sakshi's Career Crossroads

Sakshi stared at the email, the words blurring together as her mind raced. **“Restructuring Announcement.”** She had seen these before—had written some of them herself. But, this one was different.

She clicked it open.

Sakshi, we would like to discuss a new opportunity for you in our global office... relocation required.

Her fingers tightened around the coffee mug in her hand, the warmth barely registering. *Relocation.* A promotion? A power move? Or, a polite way of clearing space?

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. Across the room, her daughter, Rhea, was flipping through a magazine, oblivious to the storm brewing in her mother's mind.

“Mom, did you always want to work this much?” Rhea asked casually, not looking up.

Sakshi blinked. The question caught her off guard, unraveling a memory she hadn’t revisited in years.

Flashback – 18 Years Ago

They had been married just a year. Vikram had taken her to a fancy restaurant—one of those dimly lit places where the waiters refilled your glass after every sip. It was a celebration. Sakshi had just landed a leadership role, a huge step up from her previous job.

“You are going to be unstoppable,” Vikram had said, raising his glass. His eyes sparkled with admiration. “You know, I always wanted a wife who was more than just... you know, *a wife*.”

She laughed. “Oh? And what does *more than just a wife* mean?”

“Someone who has a career, ambition. Not just running behind kids all day.” He winked. “A power couple—that’s what we’ll be.”

Sakshi had believed him. She had believed that love meant wanting the best for each other, that Vikram’s support was solid ground. And for a while, it was.

Then the promotions kept coming. The work trips increased. The late nights at the office became the norm.

Slowly, the Vikram who once beamed at her success had changed. The man who had once called her *unstoppable* now sighed when she answered work calls at dinner. The one who had wanted an ambitious wife now made comments like, “*Are you sure you’re not overdoing it?*”

The first time she noticed it was at a dinner party. Someone had congratulated her on a major deal. Instead of his usual pride, Vikram had smiled tightly and said, “*Yeah, she barely has time for us anymore, but hey, at least she’s killing it at work.*”

People laughed. Sakshi had laughed, too. But something inside her had shifted.

Back to the Present

Sakshi’s fingers hovered over her laptop trackpad.

She glanced at Vikram’s photo on the bookshelf—his confident, easygoing smile frozen in time. The same smile that had once been full of admiration, but, was now laced with something else.

If I take this offer, will I still be the woman he once wanted?

Or, had she already stopped being that woman a long time ago?

Her phone buzzed. A message from her boss: **"Let's discuss the relocation. We see great potential in you."**

For the first time in years, Sakshi wasn't sure if that was a compliment or a warning.



Chapter 14:

A Late–Night Encounter

Still restless from his father's words, Arjun grabbed a bottle of water, but found it empty. Frustrated, he stepped out of his apartment, hesitating before knocking at 402.

The young girl opened the door, surprised. "Arjun?"

"Hey... uh, my water bottle's empty. Can I...?"

She smirked, stepping aside. "Of all the reasons to knock on a girl's door at midnight, this one's new."

As she handed him the glass, their fingers brushed. "Tough night?" she asked.

Arjun exhaled. "You could say that."

She leaned against the counter. "Wanna talk?"

They sat by the window, city lights flickering beyond. She spoke first, about coming from a small town, about how

Mumbai had felt suffocating at first. How, slowly, she had begun to understand her parents' worries—the fears she once mocked now made sense and how it all came full circle.

Arjun listened, nodding. Then, as if something inside him unlocked, he opened up about his mother, his music, and his father's crushing expectations. His voice was steady, but she sensed the weight behind it.

A moment of silence stretched between them. Then, gently, she placed her hand on his shoulder.

Arjun swallowed, glancing at her. "Do you ever feel like you're carrying something too heavy?"

She smiled softly. "Every day."

As he stood to leave, he hesitated at the door. Turning back, he met her eyes. "Can I hug you?"

She didn't say anything. Just stepped forward, arms opening, and for the first time in a long while, Arjun felt like he wasn't alone.



Chapter 15:

A Late–Night Reckoning

The city never truly slept, but at this hour, it exhaled. The distant hum of traffic softened, the streetlights flickered, and the world seemed suspended in an unspoken truce between the past and the future.

Sakshi stood by the balcony railing, her fingers tracing the cool metal absently. She had poured herself a drink—whisky, neat. Not for the comfort, not even for the taste. Just something to hold on to.

Vikram stepped out behind her, his presence as familiar as it was imposing. He held a glass of his own, leaning casually against the doorframe. They hadn't spoken much all evening, but Sakshi could feel his eyes on her. He had seen the email.

"You're quiet tonight," he finally said.

She smirked, swirling the liquid in her glass. "You should try it sometime."

Vikram chuckled, a dry, knowing sound. “That bad?”

“That... complicated.” She sighed, turning to face him. “They want me to move. Relocation. A ‘strategic opportunity,’ they call it.”

He took a sip, considering her words. “And, what do you call it?”

She exhaled sharply, shaking her head. “A test. A gamble. A polite way of pushing me out. Maybe all three.”

Vikram studied her for a moment before stepping forward, placing his glass on the railing. “You always wanted global exposure. This should be good news.”

She let out a hollow laugh. “Yes, it should. But, we both know how these things work. It’s either a promotion or a push. And, given how things have been lately...” She trailed off, leaving the thought unfinished.

Vikram’s jaw tightened. “You think they’re sidelining you?”

“I think they’re making me choose. Between being indispensable and being... gone.”

A silence settled between them, thick with the weight of years. The years they had spent building a life, a marriage, careers that ran parallel but rarely intersected.

Sakshi turned back toward the cityscape. “Funny, isn’t it? You once said you wanted a woman who had ambition.

One who could match you. And now—" She paused, then glanced at him. "Now, I can't tell if you're proud or if it unsettles you."

Vikram didn't answer immediately. He picked up his glass again, taking a slow sip before meeting her gaze. "Can't it be both?"

She let out a small, bitter laugh. "At least you're honest."

"You're not the only one thinking about choices, Sakshi." His voice was quieter now. "You built this. You fought for every inch of your career. But at what cost?"

She stiffened. "Are you asking as my husband or as a man who doesn't like being outpaced?"

Vikram's lips pressed into a thin line. "Does it matter?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "Because if it's the former, I might care. If it's the latter... well, then that's your insecurity to deal with, not mine."

The wind picked up slightly, rustling the curtains behind them.

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Look, I know you. I know how much this means to you. But I also know you're tired."

She looked at him sharply.

“You think I don’t see it?” Vikram continued. “The way you hesitate before opening your laptop these days? The way your shoulders tense when you talk about work? This... this isn’t just about a relocation. It’s about whether you still want to fight the same battles.”

Sakshi’s fingers tightened around her glass. “And what if I don’t know the answer?”

Vikram held her gaze for a long moment. Then, in an uncharacteristically soft voice, he said, “Then maybe that’s the real problem.”

For the first time in years, they stood there—two people who had once chosen each other, now wondering if the paths they had fought for had only pushed them further apart.

The city hummed below them, oblivious to the quiet storm brewing on a 12th-floor balcony.



Chapter 16:

Poonam's Silent Revolt

Poonam had spent the last twenty years perfecting the art of being needed. It was an unspoken rule in her household—her existence was defined by how seamlessly she could keep things running. The groceries appeared on time, the clothes were folded before anyone had to ask, the meals arrived at the dining table with clockwork precision. If she ever fell sick, the household did not collapse; it merely ran with a slight inconvenience, as though the machine was momentarily running low on oil.

Tonight, however, she sat alone in the dimly lit living room, staring at her reflection in the glass of the balcony door. **Who was she beyond the roles she played?**

A soft strumming of guitar came from Arjun's room. She smiled. At least someone in this house still had music in their life. She had once loved poetry, written it in the

stolen moments between chores and responsibilities. Now, even her thoughts rhymed in practicality.

Mahesh had been home all evening, but they had barely exchanged a handful of words. He sat in their bedroom, reading market reports like the fate of the world depended on them. In their younger days, he had admired ambitious women. Or so she had thought.

There was a time when Mahesh would introduce her proudly, saying, “*Poonam writes the most beautiful poetry.*” But as the years passed, his admiration shifted towards things that “mattered.” Mutual funds. Career milestones. Raising a son who wouldn’t waste his life chasing music.

Her phone vibrated. A message from Sangeeta.

Sangeeta: *Madam, you said the poetry book is in the old cupboard, but I couldn’t find it. Are you sure?*

Poonam’s heart skipped a beat. The book.

She had tucked it away years ago, somewhere in the back of a cupboard filled with things that no longer fit—the sweater from her college days, an old birthday card, and a version of herself that she had left behind.

A sudden urge gripped her—to find it, to touch the pages she had once filled with words that had felt too indulgent for a life that had no room for indulgences. She walked

towards the cupboard and pulled open the heavy wooden door. The shelves were stacked with neatly folded sarees, photo albums, and sealed boxes of things she had convinced herself she would need "someday."

And then, there it was. A dusty brown notebook.

She hesitated before picking it up, as if touching it would unravel something she had worked too hard to keep buried.

She flipped through the pages. **Her words were still there.** Her voice, younger and more fearless, speaking back to her from the past.

"मैंने भी ख्वाब बुने थे कभी,

सपनों की चुनरी ओढ़ी थी,

पर ज़िम्मेदारियों की सलाई ने,

हर धागे की गिरह खोल दी।"

I too once wove dreams, wrapping myself in a *shawl* of wishes,

soft against the skin.

But responsibilities came like sharp needles,

pulling, tugging, until every knot slipped loose,

and the threads lay broken in my hands.

A lump formed in her throat. Has she really been this girl once? Someone who believed that dreams and responsibilities could coexist?

A deep sigh from the bedroom made her pause. She looked towards the closed door where Mahesh sat, unaware of the storm raging inside her.

Was it ever really his fault? Or had she willingly let go of parts of herself to fit into the mold of an ideal wife, an ideal mother? And now, with Arjun on the verge of finding his own path, what was left for her?

Outside, the night carried the distant sound of honking cars and city life moving forward.

For the first time in years, she felt an unfamiliar longing—not for what was, but for what still could be.



Chapter 17:

A Mother's Choices

Arjun found his mother on the balcony, her hands wrapped around a *then* hot cup of tea that had probably gone cold. The night was unusually silent, as if the city had paused to take a breath.

He leaned against the railing. "Can't sleep?"

Poonam gave a small smile. "It happens when you spend years worrying about others."

Arjun chuckled. "And I thought you had everything figured out."

She shook her head. "Mothers aren't born wise, Arjun. We learn as we go, mostly from our own mistakes."

There was a long pause. Arjun hesitated before speaking. "*Maa*, are you... happy?"

The question lingered in the air. Poonam took a deep breath, as if weighing her answer carefully. "Happiness is a tricky thing. It changes shape as you grow older."

Arjun frowned. "That sounds like a poetic way of saying no."

Poonam sighed. "It means I have learned to find contentment where I can. Life isn't about getting everything you want. It's about making peace with what you have."

"That sounds like another way of saying you compromised."

She turned to look at him. "Is that a bad thing?"

Arjun ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know. Maybe? I just don't understand why you had to."

Poonam let out a soft laugh, but there was no humor in it. "You think compromises are only made by those who lose, don't you?"

Arjun shrugged. "Aren't they?"

She took a sip of her now-cold tea. "When I married your father, I was ambitious. I had dreams, just like you. And he—he loved that about me."

Arjun raised an eyebrow. "Then what changed?"

Poonam looked away. “Marriage changes things. Priorities shift. When you have a family, you start making decisions that aren’t just about you anymore.”

Arjun’s voice was quiet but firm. “Did he ever compromise for you?”

She froze.

Arjun exhaled. “That’s what I don’t understand, *Maa*. If love is about partnership, why does it feel like you were the only one adjusting?”

Poonam opened her mouth as a means to confess, but then sealed it back. She looked at her son, a boy on the verge of becoming a man, questioning things she had spent years trying to overlook.

She placed a hand on his cheek, her eyes warm but tired. “Arjun, love isn’t a competition of sacrifices. It’s about choosing which battles are worth fighting and which ones are supposed to be not chosen.”

Arjun held her gaze. “And how do you know if you’ve let go of the wrong ones?”

Poonam smiled sadly. “You don’t. You just live with it.”

Arjun nodded, but deep down, something unsettled him. He wasn’t sure if he could accept that answer.

As he walked back to his room, he realized something—his mother had spent her whole life making peace with things.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to live the same way.



Chapter 18:

A Conversation Under the Stars

The night air was cool, carrying a faint breeze as Arjun stepped out for a walk. The events of the past few days weighed on his mind—the conversation with his mother, the growing restlessness inside him, and the feeling that no matter how hard he tried, he was stuck in a loop of expectations and helplessness.

He was lost in thought when he spotted her—the girl from 402—leaning against the railing near the society's garden. Her long hair was slightly tousled by the wind, her arms crossed, lost in thought.

She noticed him and straightened. “Hey,” she said. “Got a minute?”

Arjun smirked. “As long as you’re not about to sue me.”

She chuckled but then hesitated. “Actually, I wanted to say something. I, uh... overheard your conversation last night with your mom.”

His expression stiffened. “You were eavesdropping?”

She winced. “Not intentionally! I went to my balcony to pick up some clothes, and, well... let’s just say sound travels. I heard more than I should have. I’m sorry.”

He sighed and looked away. “It’s fine. Not much of a secret anyway.”

She studied his face for a moment. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Arjun exhaled, shaking his head with a small, humorless smile. “What’s there to say? It’s the same story in so many homes. A woman bends, adjusts, and loses parts of herself while everyone applauds her ‘sacrifice.’ And if she ever thinks about reclaiming something, it’s suddenly a crime.”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah. It’s strange, isn’t it? We all grow up thinking our parents are invincible, and then one day, you see them for who they really are—flawed, uncertain, stuck in their own mess. And the worst part? You realize you might end up the same.”

He glanced at her, intrigued. “Is that the lawyer you are talking about, or the small-town girl who ran away?”

She smiled wryly. “A bit of both. My parents think I’ve abandoned them. They don’t understand why I’d trade a ‘secure’ life for one filled with chaos and struggle. But the truth is... I left so I wouldn’t become my mother.”

Arjun's grip on the railing tightened. "And yet, we still carry them inside us, don't we? Their fears, their voices, their regrets."

She nodded, understanding in her eyes. "Yeah. We do."

They walked in silence for a few minutes before she nudged him lightly. "Want to come up for coffee? Or is that against your brooding musician code?"

Arjun smirked. "Let's risk it."

Inside her apartment, the warm glow of the lamps softened the space. She moved to the kitchen while Arjun settled onto the couch, watching her. She was different tonight—more unguarded, more present.

"So," she called over her shoulder, "are you planning to start a rebellion for your mother's freedom, or are you just going to write sad songs about it?"

Arjun chuckled. "Option B sounds easier."

She returned with two steaming mugs, handing him one. "Coward."

He took a sip, then grimaced. "Okay, this is terrible."

She gasped. "Excuse me? This is premium, overpriced, organic nonsense!"

"Tastes like punishment."

She swatted his arm, laughing, but then the moment settled into something quieter. She sat on the couch

beside him, her fingers wrapped around her mug, her gaze thoughtful.

“You know,” she said softly, “for someone who acts like he doesn’t care, you feel things very deeply.”

Arjun glanced at her. “And for someone who argues for a living, you’re surprisingly good at listening.”

She smiled, but her eyes held something else—a quiet understanding.

The space between them was small, and neither of them moved away. It wasn’t just attraction; it was something deeper. A recognition of loneliness, of struggles that hadn’t been spoken aloud.

Arjun reached out, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. She didn’t flinch.

Her breath caught, her gaze flickering to his lips for just a second. It would have been so easy—so natural—to close that distance.

But he didn’t.

Instead, he withdrew his hand, exhaling with a soft chuckle. “I don’t want to mess this up.”

She blinked, as if snapping out of a trance. And then, slowly, she smiled.

“You won’t.”

She shifted closer and, without hesitation, wrapped her arms around him. It wasn't hurried or awkward—it was warm, deliberate.

For the first time in a long time, Arjun let himself be held.

And for the first time, she wasn't afraid of holding on.



Chapter 19:

The Virus and the Divide

Sangeeta had been missing for two days. No morning tea discussions. No sharp-tongued remarks about her husband's drinking. No updates on the ongoing scandals of the society. The absence of her voice itself felt like a warning.

It was Arjun who first noticed. "Has anyone seen Sangeeta?" he asked his mother one evening.

Poonam shook her head. "No, she hasn't come. I thought maybe she took a day off."

"She never takes a day off," he muttered, feeling a strange unease settle over him.

And then, late that night, the news came.

Sangeeta's husband had tested positive for COVID. He had been running a high fever for two days, struggling to breathe. Sangeeta had tried tracing out ambulances,

hospitals, even local clinics, but everywhere, the response was the same—**“No beds available.”**

That same night, a **wealthy businessman from the society—Mr. Khanna—also tested positive.** Within minutes, his family had arranged for a **private ambulance, a VIP suite in a top hospital, and a personal doctor on standby.**

The Society's Reaction

By morning, the society WhatsApp group was buzzing.

Mr. Sharma: “This is why we need stricter rules! Sangeeta’s family must have been careless. She should not be allowed back into society.”

Mrs. Kapoor: “I knew it! These people don’t maintain hygiene. Now we are all at risk.”

Young Girl (402): “Are you saying she should be homeless because her husband got sick?”

Mr. Sharma: “Don’t twist my words. I’m only concerned about safety.”

Sakshi: “If you’re so concerned, why aren’t you talking about Mr. Khanna’s case? His whole family was attending parties last week.”

Mr. Sharma: “That’s different. He has proper medical care.”

Sakshi’s fingers hovered over the keyboard. **Different?** No, it was just that one life was worth saving, and the other was disposable.

Sangeeta’s Struggle

Meanwhile, outside the society gates, **Sangeeta was still begging for an ambulance.**

Her husband’s breathing was getting worse. She had even tried to call the same hospital where Mr. Khanna had been admitted. The response?

“No general ward beds available. Only VIP suites.”

Sangeeta laughed bitterly at that. VIP? She would be lucky if they even let her stand outside the hospital gates.

Arjun and the Young Girl Take Action

When Arjun heard about this, something inside him snapped.

“We need to do something,” he said, pacing in his balcony.

The young girl nodded. “I have some lawyers’ contacts. Let me see if they can push for a government hospital bed.”

Together, they called NGOs, tweeted to officials, and finally found a hospital that agreed to take Sangeeta’s husband in. But there was another problem—**how would they get him there without an ambulance?**

Sakshi, watching all this, sighed. **The corporate world had taught her to pick battles. But this? This was worth it.**

She made a few calls of her own. And within an hour, an ambulance arrived—not for a rich businessman, not for a VIP, but for a housemaid’s husband.

The Ending: The Divide Stays, But Humanity Wins

As the ambulance drove away, Sangeeta turned to Sakshi, Arjun, and the young girl. Her eyes were red, tired, but there was gratitude in them.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” she whispered.

Sakshi shook her head. “Just promise me one thing. The next time someone like you needs help, don’t wait for people like us to step in. Fight for them.”

Sangeeta smiled weakly. “I always do, madam. Just this time, someone fought for me.”

She wiped her face, took a deep breath, and looked towards the society gates, where some residents were still staring at her—not with concern, but with that judgmental, “unclean” expression.

Sangeeta smirked. “Don’t worry, Sharma ji, I won’t touch any of you. *Virus bhi sochta hoga—In logon ka insaniyat itna mar chuka hai, mujhe aur kya bigaadna!*” (Virus must be thinking aloud, that these people have already lost humanity..what else I can do.)

There was a stunned silence. Then, before anyone could react, she turned to Sakshi and muttered, “*Waise, madam, jab sab thik ho jaaye na, aap ek achha lawyer dhoondh dijiye... yeh ‘VIP suite’ wale logon pe defamation ka case thokna hai.*” (By the way Madam, when we are back to normal, please find me a good lawyer..I want to file a defamation case against this VIP Suite culture.)

Arjun chuckled. The young girl grinned and raised her right hand..as if to say..I shall be there!

Sakshi exhaled, shaking her head with a half-smile. “You really don’t hold back, do you?”

Sangeeta cracked her knuckles. “*Agar chup rehna hota, toh yeh duniya kab ka mujhe zinda gaad chuki hoti.*” (If I had to keep my mouth shut, the world would have buried me alive by now)

She picked up her small bag and walked towards the society gate, head held high.



Chapter 20: The Virus and the Divide

Sangeeta wiped her forehead with the edge of her saree as she stepped into Poonam Madam's kitchen. The last two days had been a blur—running between the hospital, handling Raju's medicines, dealing with the ward boys who treated poor patients like baggage rather than human beings. But at least he had a bed now, thanks to Poonam's connections.

That didn't mean the fight was over.

Her phone buzzed. It was a message from the hospital:

"Bring the next set of medicines before 4 PM. No stock available here."

As if medicines were some designer saree that hospitals could choose to *not* stock.

She sighed, stuffing her phone into her blouse and turning back to the sink. Just as she reached for the dish soap, loud voices echoed from the living room.

“But I don’t *want* to go to the government hospital, Mummy! It’s full of—”

Sangeeta’s ears perked up. That was young Riya, Poonam’s teenage daughter.

“Young lady, don’t say things like that!” Poonam’s voice was stern. “All hospitals are treating patients.”

“Then why is Uncle Bansal getting a private hospital bed in a day while others are running around for weeks?” Riya shot back.

Sangeeta almost smiled. *Arre wah, badi madam ki beti ko bhi akal aa rahi hai?* (Wow, Madam’s daughter is starting to see reality!)

“It’s... complicated,” Poonam said hesitantly.

“Complicated? Mummy, you pulled strings to get Sangeeta Aunty’s husband a bed! You know how hard it is!”

Sangeeta froze.

She hadn’t realized Riya even *knew* about that.

Poonam sighed. “Yes, I did. But you have to understand, in times of crisis, people with resources will always have an advantage.”

Riya scoffed. “That’s a fancy way of saying ‘money wins, poor people lose.’”

Silence.

Sangeeta waited, listening.

Then, in a softer voice, Riya continued, "It's just unfair, Mummy. What if we didn't have money? Would Papa be left waiting outside a hospital like so many others?"

Sangeeta couldn't see Poonam's face, but she imagined her struggling for words. Because even the best people—even the *good* ones—didn't have an answer to that.

She turned back to the dishes, letting the water run over her hands, deep in thought. Maybe change *was* happening. Maybe not today, not tomorrow. But one privileged teenager questioning the system?

That was a start.

Later that evening, when Poonam handed her some extra money for medicines, Sangeeta chuckled and said,

"Badi logon ke ghar bhi kabhi kabhi sach ki hawa chalti hai, Madam. Bas AC band karna padta hai."

(Even rich households get a breeze of truth sometimes, Madam. They just have to switch off the AC first.)



Chapter 21: A Chance Encounter in the Drizzle

The evening sky was painted in hues of deep purple and burnt orange, a quiet prelude to the approaching rain. A warm breeze rustled through the trees, carrying with it the scent of wet earth—an unmistakable sign of the season's first drizzle.

Sakshi had stepped out for a walk, her mind still occupied with lingering thoughts from her recent conversations. Beside her walked **the young girl**, whom she had bumped into near the apartment entrance. What started as a casual greeting had turned into an unspoken agreement to walk together.

The young girl had her earbuds in, nodding slightly to the music playing in her ears. Noticing Sakshi beside her, she pulled them out with a sheepish grin.

"You don't mind a walking partner, do you?" she asked.

Sakshi smiled. "Not at all. Just don't expect me to keep up with your pace—I gave up competing with young energy long ago."

The girl laughed. "No competition here, I'm just walking to clear my head."

"That makes two of us," Sakshi murmured.

Just then, **Poonam's car** rolled into the apartment complex. The headlights cut through the misty drizzle, and inside the vehicle sat **Poonam and her son, Arjun**, returning from a grocery run. Arjun sat in the passenger seat, absently scrolling through his phone, while Poonam carefully maneuvered the car into a parking spot.

The young girl instinctively glanced at the car, and when Arjun stepped out, their eyes met.

"You're everywhere, huh?" she teased.

Arjun smirked. "I could say the same about you."

Before she could retort, **Poonam stepped out of the car with a bag of vegetables**. She noticed Sakshi and the young girl together and raised an eyebrow.

"Walking in the rain, ladies? Very poetic."

Sakshi chuckled. "It started as a walk. Now it's turning into an impromptu adventure."

Another gust of wind blew, and the drizzle picked up.

“You’ll get drenched,” Poonam gestured toward a sheltered spot near the building entrance. “Come, let’s stand there.”

As the three women moved toward the shelter, Sangeeta emerged from the building, adjusting her dupatta as she prepared

to leave for the day. She noticed the small gathering and, out of curiosity, walked toward them.

Arjun smirked. "This looks like a ladies' club forming. I think I'll take my leave before I become the topic of discussion."

The young girl, a teasing glint in her eyes, shot back, "Too late. We were already discussing you before you got here."

Poonam chuckled as Arjun shook his head and walked off, disappearing into the building.

Under the shelter, the four women stood together, watching the rain turn heavier.

“You know,” Poonam mused, “Rain has a way of making people nostalgic. Or revealing things.”

Sangeeta snorted. “Or making people lose common sense and run to save drying clothes from the balcony at the last minute.”

The young girl laughed. "Or giving people the false confidence to text their ex."

Sakshi smirked. "Or worse, call them."

Poonam chuckled. "Or sit in a corner, sulking and listening to old Jagjit Singh *ghazals*, wondering where life went wrong."

Sangeeta, ever the realist, deadpanned, "In my house, rain means one thing—damp walls and a leaking roof."

They all laughed. The conversation had started lightly, but there was a rare ease, a strange comfort in it.

Sakshi glanced at Poonam. "What does rain reveal?"

Poonam tilted her head slightly. "Depends on what someone is hiding."

The words lingered, settling in the humid air.

Sangeeta, smirking, wiped her hands on her sari. "Madam, rain doesn't reveal much in my world—just that if the boss leaves early, I can finish work faster."

Another round of laughter. But Sakshi found herself stealing a glance at Poonam. There was something about her words that left a mark.

Maybe, just maybe, this conversation wasn't over yet.



Chapter 22:

The Tea That Brewed More Than Just Conversations

Sakshi hesitated for a moment before pressing the doorbell. It was a rare occasion for her to walk into someone's home without a formal invitation, but Poonam had been clear the other day— *"Your tea at my place is pending. Drop by anytime."*

And today, Sakshi had decided to take her up on it.

The door swung open, and Poonam, dressed in a breezy cotton saree, gave a knowing smile. *"Ah! So you do keep your word. Come in before I change my mind,"* she teased.

Sakshi smirked. *"I figured I should make an appearance before the invite expires."*

Inside, the apartment had the warmth of a lived-in home—cushions slightly off place, a half-read book on the center table, and the lingering aroma of freshly brewed *chai*. Sangeeta was already there, setting the tray with cups and snacks.

"Aaj to badi memsaab ka bhi darshan ho gaya," (Oh! Wow the lady boss is here.) Sangeeta said with a mock salute, making Sakshi chuckle.

"Sakshi just smiled and lovingly tapped on Sangeet's head before settling into the couch.

Poonam handed her a cup. *"This isn't your fancy green tea, just good old kadak chai."*

"Much needed," Sakshi said, taking a sip.

There was an easy silence before Poonam, never one to beat around the bush, spoke up. *"You look like someone who has a lot to say but doesn't know where to start."*

Sakshi exhaled. *"It's just... life. Balancing everything, trying to be everything to everyone."*

"And?" Poonam leaned back, waiting.

"And sometimes, I don't even know if I want this balance or if I've just trained myself to believe that I do."

Sangeeta, who had been quietly sipping her tea, snorted. *"Madam, balance sirf weighing scale pe hota hai. Zindagi mein toh ek taraf hamesha zyada hota hai."*

Poonam grinned. *"Spoken like someone who's seen more life than most of us."*

Sakshi let that sink in.

Poonam continued, *"You corporate women amaze me. You talk about 'having it all' as if life comes in a neat checklist. There's no 'all'—there's just what you can hold without dropping everything."*

Sakshi stared at her cup. *"So what do you do when you feel like you're dropping too much?"*

"You stop. And decide what's worth picking back up."

The room fell silent for a moment. Even Sangeeta, usually quick with a quip, simply nodded.

Sakshi wasn't sure why, but something about that conversation stayed with her. Maybe it was the simplicity of it. Maybe it was the fact that, for once, she didn't feel the need to have the right answer.

As she got up to leave, Poonam called out, *"This was just the first tea. Next one, I'll make it stronger."*

Sakshi smiled. *"I might just take you up on that."*

And for the first time in a long time, she meant it.



Chapter 23:

The Unspoken Weight of Dreams

The city stretched before them like a silent spectator, its lights flickering in the night air. Sakshi and Vikram sat on the balcony, both in their own thoughts and waiting for other to start the conversation. There was a silent love in Vikram's eyes who was trying to read Sakshi's face but she was lost in her thoughts.

A half-finished bottle of wine sat between them, two glasses held in restless hands. The drizzle from earlier had left the air thick with the scent of wet earth, mixing with the faint aroma of jasmine from a nearby plant.

Sakshi stared at the skyline, her fingers tracing the rim of her glass. "Do you think we ever truly make choices, or do choices make us?"

Vikram, reclining in his chair, let out a slow breath. "That sounds dangerously close to a philosophical crisis.

Should I pour us another drink before we go down this road?"

She smirked but didn't answer. Instead, she took a sip, the warmth of the wine doing little to settle the unease in her chest.

"I got a call from HR today," she said finally. "They're expecting an answer soon."

Vikram nodded, watching her carefully. "And?"

"And... I don't know, Vikram. On paper, it's perfect. The role, the pay, the prestige. But when I picture myself there, I—" She hesitated, searching for the right words. "I don't feel anything. No excitement, no joy. Just... exhaustion."

Vikram leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Is it the job, or what it represents?"

She exhaled sharply. "Everything. Uprooting life. Leaving you and Anika here. Starting over in a new place where I'll be expected to prove myself all over again. And for what? Another title? A bigger paycheck?" Vikram swirled the wine in his glass, thinking. "Would it have been easier if it were me? If I had to move, would you have followed?"

Sakshi was still. She hadn't expected that.

“I—” She faltered. Would she have? Years ago, she might have said yes without hesitation. But now?

Vikram smiled knowingly. “Exactly. It’s not just about the job. It’s about the reality we’ve built. A reality where neither of us knows how to balance our ambitions without feeling guilty about it.”

She sighed, rubbing her temples. “Why does it always fall on us? Women? We fight for careers, for independence, and then spend our lives negotiating guilt.”

Vikram gave a wry chuckle. “We men aren’t exactly free either, you know. We just don’t talk about it as much.”

She glanced at him. “So, do you want me to go?”

He hesitated—just a fraction of a second, but enough for her to notice. “I want you to be happy.”

“That’s not an answer.”

He placed his glass down and leaned back. “Because I don’t have one, Sakshi. If I say, ‘Yes, go,’ you’ll think I don’t care enough to ask you to stay. If I say, ‘No, stay,’ you’ll wonder if I’m holding you back. Either way, I lose.”

Sakshi swallowed the lump in her throat.

For years, she had thought of Vikram as the unwavering one, the pole star in her life. But now, she could see the flicker of doubt, the same internal battle she was fighting.

A moment of silence stretched between them, heavy yet comforting.

Finally, she asked, almost in a whisper, **“Would you have compromised for me?”**

Vikram looked at her, startled.

And for the first time that night, he had no words.

The city lights flickered, and the night stretched on, unresolved.



Chapter 24:

Crossroads

The night was still, except for the occasional rustling of leaves. The city, though always alive, had a rare moment of quiet—a deceptive calm, much like the turmoil inside Sakshi's mind.

She stood by the balcony, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the rim of her coffee mug. The dim glow from the streetlights cast soft shadows on her face, highlighting the lines of contemplation.

Vikram walked in, his sleeves rolled up, a glass of water in his hand. He didn't say anything at first. He knew her well enough to sense when she needed space. Instead, he leaned against the railing beside her, letting the silence stretch between them.

Finally, he spoke.

"You've been lost in thought all evening."

Sakshi let out a deep breath. **“Vikram, do you think we made the right choices?”**

He raised an eyebrow. **“Right choices about what?”**

She turned to face him. **“About everything. About career, about moving cities for work, about prioritizing ambition over—”** she hesitated, searching for the right word, **“—over life.”**

Vikram didn’t answer immediately. He took a sip of water, considering his words.

“We made the best choices we could at that time,” he said finally. **“And if we’re questioning them now, maybe it means we’ve changed. Or maybe the world around us has.”**

Sakshi exhaled a laugh—dry, hollow. **“Or maybe we just fooled ourselves into believing we were in control.”**

Vikram smiled. **“That, too.”**

She shook her head. **“You always do that.”**

“Do what?”

“Diffuse everything with humor.”

“Would you rather I over analyze it with you? I could, but I think you’ve already done enough of that for both of us.”

Sakshi gave him a knowing look. **“You’re not as unaffected as you pretend to be, Vikram.”**

He sighed, rubbing his forehead. **“No, I’m not.”** He turned to her, his expression soft but steady. **“Do you regret it?”**

She didn’t answer immediately. Instead, she looked at the cityscape, the countless lights dotting the horizon, each window holding a different story, different choices, different regrets.

Finally, she whispered, **“I don’t know.”**

The weight of her words settled between them.

Vikram placed his glass down and turned to face her fully. A gentle breeze swept through, lifting strands of her hair and blowing them across her face. Instinctively, he reached out, tucking them behind her ear, letting his fingers linger for a moment longer than necessary.

Sakshi still. She felt his fingertips graze her skin, a touch so familiar yet so distant.

“If you want to stay back, Sakshi, I’ll support you. You don’t have to go.”

She looked at him, a flicker of something unreadable in her eyes. **“And what about you?”**

He hesitated. **“I don’t know either.”**

For the first time in years, they stood there—not as husband and wife, not as professionals making calculated decisions—but simply as two people, standing at a crossroads, unsure of which road to take.

Vikram reached out again, this time placing a warm palm on her back, rubbing slow, soothing circles. It was a gesture he had done a thousand times before—after long days, before difficult conversations, in quiet moments of exhaustion.

Sakshi sighed, leaning into his touch, allowing herself to feel comforted, even if just for a moment.

“I just don’t want us to wake up one day and realize we spent our whole lives running, without ever knowing what we were running towards.”

Vikram squeezed her hand gently. Then, in a rare moment of tenderness, he leaned in, pressing a soft kiss on her forehead. A touch of reassurance. A silent promise.

“Maybe the answer isn’t in running or stopping,” he murmured. **“Maybe it’s in choosing where to run.”**

She smiled—a small, tired smile. **“Maybe.”**

And with that, they stood there, holding onto each other in the quiet of the night, letting the weight of their choices linger in the air.



Chapter 25: Unfinished Conversations

The clinking of the cutlery stopped. The plates on the dining table were half-empty, much like the conversations in the house with rival ideologies. Poonam and Mahesh sat across from each other, the silence between them stretching like an invisible wall.

Mahesh leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temple. “I don’t understand why we have to keep coming back to this, Poonam.”

“Because we never really talk about it, Mahesh,” Poonam shot back, her voice sharp but not loud. “We just let it sit in the air, pretending it’s not there.”

Mahesh exhaled in frustration. “Talk about what? That life didn’t turn out to be a damn Bollywood movie? That responsibilities took over? That we made choices and lived with them, just like every other normal couple?”

Poonam's fingers tightened around the edge of the table. "Did we live with them? Or, did we just accept them like we had no other choice?"

Mahesh scoffed. "And what would you have done differently, huh? Quit everything, run off to write poetry, live in some dream world?"

Poonam's jaw clenched. "That's exactly the problem, Mahesh. You never even considered the possibility that I could have had a dream, too. That I could have been more than just... this."

At that moment, Arjun walked in, carrying his guitar case. He stopped mid-step, sensing the tension in the air. He set the case down against the wall and folded his arms.

"Oh, great. Another episode of *The Great Indian Marriage Meltdown*," he muttered sarcastically.

Poonam turned toward him, exhaling sharply. "Arjun, not now."

"No, actually, now is perfect," Arjun said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. He looked at his mother first. "You've been doing this for years, haven't you? This... justifying, compromising, trying to explain away everything that's wrong."

Poonam's eyes softened. "Arjun, it's not that simple."

“But it is,” Arjun insisted. His gaze shifted to his father. “Dad, do you even realize what you’ve done to her?”

Mahesh frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You caged her,” Arjun said, his voice growing more intense. “You built a life where she had no room for herself. Where she had to become what was expected of her, not what she wanted. Do you even remember the last time she did something just for *her*?”

Poonam looked away, a lump forming in her throat.

Mahesh’s face darkened. “That’s not fair. We made choices *together*. Life doesn’t give you everything on a silver platter. We had responsibilities, a child to raise-”

“Oh, *don’t* put me in this,” Arjun snapped. “Don’t use me as an excuse for why she checked out emotionally and forgot herself.”

Poonam reached out, her voice soft but firm. “Arjun, stop it.”

But Arjun wasn’t done. “You could have been so much more, Mom. A writer, a poet, something, anything! And instead, you’re here, sitting at this table every night, fighting the same fight you’ve been fighting for years.”

Mahesh slammed his hand on the table, making both of them flinch. “Enough, Arjun!” His voice was sharp, authoritative. “This is life. You think you know

everything because you have dreams and a guitar to string them with? Let me tell you something—dreams don't pay bills. They don't build homes. They don't raise kids."

Arjun let out a humorless chuckle. "And what did *this* give you, huh? A house full of silence? A wife who wonders if she even lived her own life? A son who doesn't want to end up like you?"

Mahesh's face hardened, but for a second, something flickered in his eyes—hurt, maybe even guilt.

Arjun shook his head, picking up his guitar case. "I want to be free," he said, voice quieter now. "And I sure as hell don't want to become like this."

With that, he stormed out of the house, leaving behind the heavy weight of words that couldn't be taken back.

Poonam sat motionless, staring at the spot where Arjun had stood. Mahesh looked away, jaw clenched. The silence that followed wasn't just uncomfortable—it was unbearable.



Chapter 26:

A Night of Unspoken Words

Arjun hesitated outside her door, guitar case slung over his shoulder. The dim light from the hallway flickered slightly, casting long shadows. He hadn't planned on coming here tonight, but when she had texted—just a simple, *Come over. Coffee's on.*—he hadn't thought twice.

She opened the door before he could knock, her eyes flickering with something unreadable.

"Thought you wouldn't show up," she teased, stepping aside to let him in.

Her apartment was small but cozy. A soft, warm glow from a corner lamp bathed the room in gold. The scent of coffee and something faintly floral lingered in the air. She walked ahead of him, barefoot, her loose sweater slipping slightly off one shoulder.

He tried not to notice.

She gestured toward the couch. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll get the coffee."

Arjun set his guitar down and sat, drumming his fingers against his knee. He was still wired from the argument at home, frustration humming beneath his skin.

She returned, handing him a cup before curling up on the other end of the couch. "So... bad night?"

Arjun exhaled, staring at the dark liquid in his cup. "The usual. Parents who pretend everything's fine, except it's not. My mom deserves more than this life, and my dad—he just doesn't care enough to change anything."

She watched him for a moment. "And you? What do *you* deserve?"

He looked up, caught off guard by the question—and the way she was looking at him. Not with pity, but with something softer. Curious. Searching.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Freedom, maybe? Love that doesn't feel like a compromise?"

She smirked. "That's a pretty big ask in this world."

"Yeah? What about you?" he countered. "What do *you* want?"

Something flickered in her expression, but she just took a slow sip of coffee. "Maybe I'll tell you someday."

Silence settled between them—not awkward, but charged. Arjun could feel the weight of her presence, the warmth of her so close. The low hum of an old jazz record playing in the background added to the intimacy of the moment.

She reached out suddenly, her fingers lightly brushing his wrist. “You’re always so tense,” she murmured.

He swallowed, his pulse jumping at the contact.

She didn’t pull away. Instead, her touch lingered, tracing absentminded patterns along the veins of his forearm. It was the kind of touch that wasn’t meant to be seductive, yet it made the air between them crackle.

Arjun turned his hand over, catching her fingers in his. Neither of them moved, but the shift in energy was palpable.

She looked up at him then, her lips parting slightly. There was no hesitation, no overthinking—just the natural pull of something unspoken.

His eyes flickered down to her lips, and for a moment, just a moment, he thought about closing the distance. Thought about what she would taste like, what it would feel like to let go of everything for just one second.

But instead, he exhaled sharply and let go of her hand, running a hand through his hair with a short, self-deprecating laugh. “I should probably go.”

Her gaze held him for a beat longer before she smiled—soft, knowing. “Yeah... probably.”

But neither of them moved.

And in the quiet space between them, something unspoken settled.

Something that neither of them were ready to name just yet.



Chapter 27: Between Dreams and Realities

The morning sun streamed through the kitchen window, casting long golden streaks across the counter. Sangeeta was rinsing out a steel tumbler when she noticed the young girl sitting by the dining table, stirring her coffee absentmindedly. There was a certain lightness about her today—her eyes distant yet smiling, a softness in her posture that wasn't there before.

"Oh wow, madamji! What's the matter? Today it looks like you're floating in the air!" Sangeeta smirked, wiping her hands on her saree pallu.

The young girl blinked as if caught in a daydream. She chuckled, shaking her head.

"Nahi toh, bas aise hi..." (No, no... nothing! Just like that...)

Sangeeta scoffed.

"Aise hi kuch nahi hota. Kal raat toh bade busy lag rahe the humare Arjun baba! Gaana bajana, moonlight mein walk... ab samjhi, yahaan yeh coffee bhi meethi lag rahi hogi!"

(Nothing happens "just like that." Last night our Arjun baba looked quite busy! Music, a stroll in moonlight no wonder even the coffee must be tasting sweeter today!)

The young girl tried to suppress her smile but failed miserably. "You should be a detective, Sangeeta didi."

"Haan toh hoon na! Jab se yeh kaam kar rahi hoon na, gharon ki deewaron ke peeche ki kahaniyaan padne ka talent aa gaya hai."

(Of course I am! Ever since I started this work, I've developed a talent for reading the stories hidden behind household walls.)

The young girl sighed, tracing the rim of her coffee mug. "Do you believe in love, Sangeeta?"

Sangeeta looked up sharply, as if the question had slapped her. For a moment, she was quiet. Then she let out a dry laugh.

"Pyaar? Yeh jo filmon mein dikhate hain na, baarish mein bhagne wala, ek doosre ki aankhon mein doob jaane wala pyaar? Haan, maine bhi kabhi sapne dekhe

the, par phir zindagi ne rassi kheench ke neeche utaar diya."

(Love? The kind they show in films—running in the rain, drowning in each other's eyes? Yes, I once dreamt of that too... but then life yanked the rope and pulled me back down.)

The young girl leaned forward. "Tell me about it."

Sangeeta hesitated, rubbing her hands together. Then she spoke, her voice softer than usual.

"Shaadi hui toh laga ki ek naya jeevan shuru hoga. Ek insaan jo apna hoga, jo saath nibhaayega... par pata chala ki zindagi ek cycle hai—jo chalti rahegi, chahe tu khush ho ya na ho."

(When I got married, I thought a new life would begin. A person who'd be mine, who'd stand by me... but I realized life is just a cycle—it keeps moving, whether you're happy or not.)

The young girl frowned. "Your husband... doesn't treat you well?"

Sangeeta let out a small, humorless chuckle.

"Woh koi ek baat thodi hai, madamji? Kabhi pitai, kabhi gaali, kabhi bas yeh ehsaas ki tu sirf kaam karne wali hai, insaan nahi. Kabhi laga ki bhaag jaun, par kahaan? Zindagi mein koi door khuli hi nahi thi."

(It's not just one thing, madamji. Sometimes beatings, sometimes abuse, sometimes just the constant reminder that you're only meant to work, not live as a person. I often thought of running away... but where? No door in my life was ever open.)

A silence stretched between them. The young girl looked down at her coffee, as if processing the weight of Sangeeta's words.

"But you still smile. You still fight," she finally said.

Sangeeta exhaled, shaking her head.

"Haan, kyunki agar nahi hasungi na, toh toot jaungi. Aur agar toot gayi toh kaun jodega?"

(Yes, because if I don't smile, I'll break. And if I break, who will put me back together?)

The young girl swallowed. "That's... a really lonely thought."

"Zindagi akeli hi chalti hai, madamji. Aapke jaise log pyaar dhoondhte hain. Hum jaise log sirf rozi roti dhoondhte hain."

(Life walks alone, madamji. People like you search for love. People like us... we only search for bread and survival.)

The young girl smiled faintly. "Maybe one day, you'll find love again, Sangeeta."

Sangeeta laughed, this time with genuine amusement.

"Arre madamji, hum logon ke liye pyaar chhoti soch hai. Pyaar toh sirf paisewaale log afford kar sakte hain!"

(Oh madamji, for people like us, love is a luxury. Only the wealthy can afford love!)

She turned to leave, but then hesitated.

"Ek baat kahun?" (Shall I tell you something?)

The young girl nodded.

"Arjun achha ladka hai. Bahut achha. Bahut sensitive hai. Duniya ko dikhaata nahi, par andar se bohot accha insaan hai."

(Arjun is a good boy. Very good. Very sensitive. He doesn't show it to the world, but inside, he is a truly kind person.)

The young girl looked at her, surprised.

"Mujhe yaad hai... ek baar meri beti ki school fees bharni thi. Ghar mein paisa nahi tha. Kisi se keh nahi sakti thi. Arjun babu ko pata nahi kaise pata chal gaya... bina kisi se bole paisa de diya, keh diya ki wapas karne ki zaroorat nahi."

(I remember once—I had to pay my daughter's school fees. We had no money at home, and I couldn't tell anyone. I don't know how Arjun babu found out... but

he quietly gave me the money and said I didn't need to return it.)

The young girl blinked. "He never told me that..."

Sangeeta smiled faintly.

"Woh kabhi nahi batayega. Kyunki uske liye yeh normal hai. Uske andar dukh samajhne ki shakti hai, aur madad karne ka mann. Aur yeh cheez sirf pyaar se nahi aati... yeh aadmi ki aadat hoti hai, jo ya toh hoti hai, ya nahi hoti."

(He'll never tell you. Because for him, it's normal. He has the ability to feel others' pain, and the heart to help. And that doesn't come from love—it comes from a man's nature. You either have it, or you don't.)

The young girl looked away, her fingers tightening around her coffee mug.

Sangeeta sighed, stretching her arms.

"Pyaar... bas do mahine ke andar aadat ban jaata hai. Sex ke baad ya shaadi ke baad toh aur bhi jaldi khatam ho jaata hai. Baaki bacha kya? Bas aadmi ki fitrat."

(Love... within two months, it just becomes a habit. After sex or marriage, it ends even faster. What remains? Only man's true nature.)

The young girl looked at her, a strange new realization dawning in her mind.

Sangeeta picked up her cleaning cloth and turned to leave, pausing at the door with a smirk.

"Lekin abhi toh naye naye pyaar ka time hai na? Chalo, enjoy karo! Baaki asli zindagi ka lecture baad mein dunga."

(But right now, it's the season of new love, isn't it? Go on, enjoy it! I'll give you the real-life lecture later.)

The young girl laughed, shaking her head. "You're impossible, Sangeeta didi."

"Haan, aur zindagi bhi."

(Yes, and so is life.)

Sangeeta disappeared into the kitchen.

The young girl sat there for a long time, her coffee now cold.

For the first time, she wasn't just thinking about love.

She was thinking about character. About kindness. About the things that lasted longer than passion.

And maybe... just maybe... about Arjun in a way she never had before.



Chapter 28:

Fractures and Fault Lines

The air in the house was heavy. Not with words, but with the lack of them. The kind of silence that isn't peaceful, but suffocating.

Dinner was over, but no one had moved from the dining table. Mahesh was scrolling through his phone, his face blank, detached. Poonam sat with a distant look, absently running a spoon around an empty bowl. Arjun, arms crossed, was staring at both of them, frustration flickering in his eyes.

It was Poonam who finally spoke. "Mahesh, I've been thinking about what you said the other day... about our life. About how things are."

Mahesh let out a tired sigh, not looking up. "Poonam, we've been through this before. What's the point?"

Arjun's fingers tightened on his arms. "The point, Dad, is that there is no life in this house. It's a prison."

Mahesh shot him a look, finally breaking away from his screen. “Don’t be dramatic, Arjun.”

“Dramatic?” Arjun let out a dry laugh. “You want to see drama? Because this—this passive-aggressive silence, this tension—it’s worse than any shouting match!”

Poonam flinched but didn’t disagree. Arjun turned to her. “Mom, say something! You always just... absorb things, keep them inside. Why don’t you fight back?”

Poonam’s lips parted, then pressed into a thin line. “I don’t see the point in fighting.”

“There! That’s exactly what I mean!” Arjun’s chair scraped loudly as he pushed it back. “You’ve just... given up! You don’t write anymore, you don’t travel, you don’t *live*.”

Mahesh’s voice turned sharp. “Arjun, enough! Not everyone gets the luxury to sit with a guitar and dream! Some of us have responsibilities.”

Arjun’s jaw clenched. “Responsibilities? You mean obligations? Is that what marriage is? A lifetime contract of tolerating each other?”

Mahesh’s face darkened. “You don’t understand—”

“No, Dad, I *do* understand.” Arjun’s voice was firm now. “I understand that Mom wanted to be a writer, and she never got to be one. I understand that she doesn’t speak

because she's spent years making peace with a life she never wanted. And I understand that you—" he gestured at his father, eyes blazing—"have stopped even pretending to care."

Silence. Thick and heavy.

Then, softly, Poonam spoke. "Arjun... it's not that simple."

Arjun turned to her, pain flickering in his gaze. "Then explain it to me, Mom. Explain why you chose this life. Why do you let go of your dreams? And please—don't tell me it's just 'how life is.'"

Poonam exhaled slowly. "I made choices. Maybe some were wrong, maybe some were necessary. But they were mine to make."

Arjun shook his head. "But what about now? You still have a life ahead of you. Do you want to spend it like this? Silent? Unseen?"

Mahesh stood abruptly. "This conversation is over."

"No," Arjun shot back. "It's just getting started."

Poonam closed her eyes for a second before standing up too. "Arjun, go to your room."

Arjun let out a hollow laugh. "Right. Just shut up and accept things, like you always do, huh?"

Mahesh's patience snapped. "Enough, Arjun!"

But Arjun was already grabbing his guitar. "You know what? I don't want this life. I don't want to be stuck in a house where everyone walks on eggshells, where love is just a responsibility."

Poonam's breath hitched. "Arjun, where are you going?"

"I don't know," he muttered, slinging the guitar strap over his shoulder. "Somewhere that feels *alive*."

And with that, he walked out.

The door shut behind him with a finality that made Poonam's shoulders slump.

Mahesh rubbed his forehead. "He's being ridiculous."

Poonam didn't respond.

She was staring at the closed door, a hollow feeling settling inside her. Because for the first time in a long time, someone had voiced everything she had spent years suppressing.

And it terrified her.



Chapter 29:

A Night of Unspoken Words

Arjun sat on the edge of the park's low boundary wall, strumming his guitar absentmindedly. The night was quiet, apart from the occasional rustling of leaves and distant honking from the main road. His fingers moved over the strings, but his mind was elsewhere—lost in the maze of emotions that had erupted at home.

"Running away won't solve anything, you know," a soft voice said behind him.

He turned to see her standing there, arms crossed, a playful yet knowing smile on her lips. She had followed him.

He sighed. "I'm not running away. Just... taking a break from the circus."

She stepped closer and sat beside him, pulling her knees up to her chest. "You left in quite a dramatic fashion. Your poor guitar must be exhausted."

Arjun smirked but didn't respond. A few beats of silence passed before she spoke again.

"You want to talk about it?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

A pause.

"Okay... So, what do you want to talk about?" she asked, tilting her head playfully.

Arjun let out a small chuckle. "You're impossible."

"I try," she said with a grin. "But seriously, what happened back there?"

He exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. "It's always the same. This house, this life... It's like we're all actors in some never-ending play, repeating the same dialogues, playing the same roles. My mom has lost herself in the script, my dad doesn't even realize there's a problem, and I... I don't want to be trapped in their world."

She listened intently, her eyes reflecting understanding. "You love your mom a lot, don't you?"

"Of course, I do," he said instantly. "She's... she was a dreamer once, you know? She used to write poetry. She

wanted to travel, to experience life beyond just being 'Mrs. Mahesh Sharma.' But somewhere along the way, she just... stopped. And now, it's like she exists, but she doesn't live. And my dad? He's too busy playing the 'perfect provider' to notice."

She nodded, watching him. "And you? What do you want?"

Arjun looked at her, as if really seeing her for the first time. His answer was on the tip of his tongue, but he hesitated. Instead, he asked, "What do *you* want?"

The question caught her off guard. She blinked, then smiled faintly. "I want... to be happy. To do something meaningful. To not wake up one day and realize I've lived my entire life by someone else's rules."

Their eyes met, and for a brief moment, it felt like the world had faded away—their frustrations, their fears, their families—everything except *this* moment.

She looked down, suddenly shy. "You know... you're a good guy, Arjun."

He chuckled. "That's the first time someone's said that after watching me throw a tantrum."

"I mean it," she said, nudging his arm lightly. "You care. Maybe too much. And that's not a bad thing."

Arjun studied her face. "You think too highly of me."

"And you don't think highly enough of yourself," she countered.

Silence stretched between them. Then, she reached out, brushing a stray strand of hair from his forehead. The touch was fleeting but electric. Arjun felt his breath hitch, his heart doing an unexpected somersault.

"You should go back," she whispered.

He swallowed. "Not yet."

She nodded, understanding. "Then I'll stay."

And so, they sat there under the night sky, saying nothing but understanding everything.



Chapter 30: The Rain That Never Stopped (Sangeeta's Flashback)

Sangeeta wiped her hands on the kitchen towel and looked at the young girl.

“Aur kuch kaam. Shaam ka pata nahi main aa paoongi ya nahi? Yeh baarish bhi na ...”

(Anything else? I'm not sure if I'll be able to come in the evening. This rain, you know...)

The girl stretched lazily in her chair, staring out at the window.

“Nahi... bas yeh baarish kam ho jaaye, toh tum jaa sakti ho. Tab tak, ek adrak wali chai bana do.”

(No... once the rain eases, you can leave. Till then, make me some ginger tea.)

Sangeeta nodded and turned toward the gas stove.

The rain hammered against the window. The young girl absentmindedly scrolled through her phone, then got into a Zoom call, her voice switching to professional mode. But every now and then, between glances at the screen, she noticed something—Sangeeta wasn't moving.

She was just standing there, staring at the rain.

The girl frowned. She muted herself on the call, got up, and walked over.

“Sangeeta... *kya hua?*”

(Sangeeta... what happened?)

Sangeeta snapped out of her trance, shaking her head too quickly.

“*Kuch nahi, bas... Baarish se nafrat hai mujhe.*”

(Nothing, it's just... I hate the rain.)

The girl smirked.

“*Ajeeb baat hai. Tum jaise mirchi bomb ko toh bijliyon se pyaar hona chahiye.*”

(That's strange. Someone as fiery as you should be in love with thunder and lightning.)

Sangeeta laughed, but it didn't reach her eyes.

The girl studied her for a moment.

"Sach batao... tum hamesha aisi thi? Itni teekhi, itni ziddi?"

(Tell me honestly... have you always been like this? So sharp, so stubborn?)

A beat of silence.

Then, a strange thing happened. Sangeeta smiled.

Not her usual sarcastic smirk, but something softer. Almost... lost.

She exhaled.

"Nahi. Main bhi kabhi baarish se pyaar karti thi."

(No. I too once loved the rain.)

And just like that, the floodgates opened.

When Sangeeta Loved the Rain

She was eighteen. Carefree. The girl who twirled in the courtyard with her arms wide open, giggling as raindrops dripped from her eyelashes.

"Sangeeta, pagal hai tu!" her mother would yell, shoving a towel at her.

("Sangeeta, you're crazy!")

But she was happiest in the rain.

That was before.

Before she learned that some storms don't wash away pain.

They bring it.

The Man Who Promised Forever

She was twenty when Rajan Malhotra entered her life.

Older. Confident. The owner of the small office where she worked as a clerk.

"Tumhari aankhon mein bada sapna hai, Sangeeta," he had said one evening, leaning against her desk.

("There's a big dream in your eyes, Sangeeta.")

She had looked down, blushing.

"Aap mazak kar rahe ho."

("You're making fun of me.")

He wasn't.

Over weeks, he made her feel special. Noticed. He spoke about her future, her talents, how she deserved better. He bought her coffee. Praised her handwriting. Laughed at her silly jokes.

And one night, during a heavy downpour, as they worked late in the office, he touched her hand.

"Main chahta hoon tum meri zindagi ka hissa bano."

("I want you to be a part of my life.")

She had shivered—not from the cold.

He kissed her that night.

She didn't resist.

Because in her head, it wasn't lust.

It was love.

The First Thunderclap

Three months later, she learned the truth.

He was married. With kids. A wife who hosted kitty parties.

Her world collapsed.

She had confronted him, shaking.

"Tumne jhooth bola mujhse!"

("You lied to me!")

He had leaned back in his chair, completely unfazed.

"Sangeeta, tumhe kya laga? Main apni biwi-bachon ko chhod dunga tumhare liye?"

("Sangeeta, what did you think? That I'd leave my wife and kids for you?")

She had felt the slap before it even landed.

Not on her cheek—but in her soul.

She had whispered,

"Lekin tumne kaha tha..."

("But you said...")

He had chuckled.

"Tum jaise ladkiyon ke sapne sapne hi hote hain. Thoda special feel kara raha tha bas."

(Dreams of girls like you remain only dreams. I was just making you feel a little special, that's all.)

And just like that, he walked away.

She had stood in the rain that night, drenched, shivering, dying inside.

That was the night she learned—the worst storms don't come from the sky.

They come from people.

And once they hit you, you're never the same.

The Second Storm: Family

When she got home, shaking, she made the mistake of telling her elder brother.

She thought he would protect her.

Instead, he slapped her so hard she hit the floor.

"Sharam nahi aayi tujhe? Khandan ki izzat mitti me mila di!"

("Aren't you ashamed? You've dragged the family's honor through the mud!")

Her mother cried. Her father refused to look at her.

By morning, they had made their decision.

She would be married off.

No questions. No arguments.

The next week, she stood in a mandap with a stranger.

And before she could even process what had happened, she was someone's wife.

The Man Who Married Her

At first, **Ravi** was kind. He wasn't educated like Rajan, didn't have money, but he had simple dreams.

She thought—**maybe she could build a life with him.**

Maybe **this** was her second chance.

Then, he lost his job.

Then, the fights started.

Then, came the drinking.

And then—the **first slap.**

She forgave him.

Until it happened again.

And again.

And again.

Not because he was evil.

But because **life had beaten him too.**

And when men feel powerless, **they take power where they can.**

But she stayed.

Not because she was weak.

Because **she had a daughter.**

And she **refused** to let her suffer the same fate.

So she worked.

She fought.

She **survived.**

And somewhere in that survival, the **old Sangeeta died.**

The one who danced in the rain.

The one who believed in love.

The one who thought **dreams come true.**

Back to the Present: The Rain Stops

Sangeeta's voice cracked as she finished.

She was dry-eyed. But her fingers **trembled** around her cup.

The young girl sat there, silent.

Then—without a word—she moved forward and wrapped Sangeeta in a hug.

Sangeeta stiffened.

And then, for the first time in years, she **broke.**

She sobbed into the young girl's shoulder—**like a child who had been holding it in for too long.**

The rain outside softened to a drizzle.

And for the first time in years, Sangeeta thought...

Maybe the rain wasn't the enemy.

Maybe it was time to let it wash the past away.



Chapter 31:

The Silent Storm

The night was unusually still. The hum of the ceiling fan above the dining table filled the void between Mahesh and Arjun, both staring blankly at the untouched cups of chai that Poonam had made before heading to bed.

It had started with a cough. A harmless, persistent tickle in her throat that she waved off with haldi doodh and lozenges. Then came the occasional pain while swallowing, moments of discomfort that she dismissed with a shake of her head and a distracted "*Bas thoda sa irritation hai.*"

For months, it had been just another part of her routine—like waking up before the rest of the house, making breakfast, checking on Arjun's schedule, ensuring Mahesh's lunchbox was packed. The symptoms were small, insignificant ripples in her day, swallowed in the tide of her responsibilities.

Until last night.

The coughing had turned violent, shaking her frame, making her gasp for air. She had rushed to the kitchen to drink water, but even swallowing felt like shards of glass piercing her throat. Mahesh had woken up to find her hunched over the sink, one hand clutching her throat, eyes wide with fear.

“Oh! This persistent cough. Don’t worry, I will be fine in a day or two.” Her voice had been barely a whisper.

“No more excuses, Poonam. You’re seeing a doctor tomorrow.” His tone had left no room for argument.

And so, she had gone.

She had sat in the clinic, her saree neatly pleated, her hands folded on her lap, answering the doctor’s questions with practiced calm. When he suggested some tests, she nodded. It was all routine.

Two days later, Mahesh’s phone rang.

"Mr. Mahesh, can you come to the hospital? We need to discuss your wife’s reports in person."

A cold dread settled over him. Hospitals don’t call people for good news.

That evening, he and Arjun sat in the doctor’s cabin, waiting. The sterile walls, the quiet shuffle of files, the

faint beeping of machines from the next room—it all felt unreal.

The doctor's face was unreadable as he pushed the reports forward. **"It's advanced stage esophageal cancer."**

A second of absolute silence.

Then a ringing sound in Mahesh's ears. He felt Arjun stiffen beside him.

"Wh—what?" Mahesh's voice cracked. "Doctor... *yeh...*"

The doctor sighed. **"The cancer has progressed. The symptoms were there—persistent cough, difficulty swallowing, occasional weight loss. Unfortunately, by the time such symptoms become noticeable, the disease is often in an advanced stage."**

Mahesh swallowed hard, his hands gripping the edge of the chair.

"Treatment?" Arjun's voice was hoarse.

The doctor hesitated. **"We can discuss options. Surgery is difficult at this stage. There's chemotherapy and radiation, but..."** He paused. **"You need to prepare yourselves."**

The finality in his tone sent a tremor through Mahesh's spine. Arjun shot up from his chair, pacing.

Mahesh tried to form words, to ask something—anything—but his throat had closed up.

Arjun suddenly turned. “Does Mom know?”

“No.”

“We have to tell her.”

Mahesh’s hands clenched. “How?”

The doctor glanced at them sympathetically. **"Gently. With support. She will need you both now, more than ever."**

Arjun let out a bitter laugh, rubbing his hands over his face. "And what if we're the ones who can't handle it?"

Mahesh looked at his son—his boy, who had never faced something this terrifying before. He wanted to say something, to offer some fatherly reassurance, but for the first time in his life, he had none.

They walked out of the hospital, side by side, yet drowning in their own thoughts.

Poonam was waiting at home, a soft smile on her lips as she looked up at them. ***"Aa gaye?"***

Mahesh felt his chest tighten. How was he supposed to look into those warm eyes and tell her that time was slipping away?

Arjun turned away abruptly and walked to his room, slamming the door shut.

Mahesh just stood there, staring at Poonam, unable to say a word.

The storm had arrived. And none of them were ready.



Chapter 32:

The Morning of Gentle Love

Poonam woke up feeling... different.

It wasn't fear. Nor was it shocking. It was a quiet, unsettling clarity. The kind that came when life stripped you of all illusions.

For years, she had woken up first, before anyone else. She was the caretaker, the nurturer, the one who ensured everyone had their tea, their breakfast, their day in order.

But today, something was different.

The familiar aroma of chai filled the air.

She blinked, pushing herself up slightly. The bedroom door was slightly open, and from the kitchen came the sound of cups clinking.

Slowly, she got up and walked out.

Arjun was standing by the kitchen counter, carefully pouring tea into three cups. The steam curled up in soft wisps, the scent rich and comforting.

She leaned against the doorframe, watching him. He was focused, careful not to spill, his brows furrowed in concentration.

She swallowed, her voice softer than usual. “*Tum chai bana rahe ho?*”

Arjun turned, startled. He hesitated for a moment before managing a small, lopsided smile. “*Haan... Mom ke liye special masala chai.*”

Poonam’s throat tightened.

Mahesh walked in just then, rubbing his face, surprised to see her awake. His eyes flickered to Arjun, to the tea, to her. An unspoken understanding passed between them.

Arjun walked over, handing her a cup. “For you.”

She took it, fingers brushing against the warm ceramic. “Thank you, *beta.*”

Her voice held a quiet depth. Acknowledgment. Love. And something more—something unspoken, yet understood.

Mahesh watched her, his hands clenched at his sides, as if he wanted to say something but couldn’t.

She took a sip.

The tea was slightly too strong, the sugar a bit uneven. But at that moment, it was the best tea she had ever tasted.

She smiled. Not a forced, practiced one, but a real, warm smile.

“Perfect.”

And just like that, for one brief moment, everything felt normal.



Chapter 33: A Silent Promise

It had been a long day. The sky was still drenched in last night's rain, leaving behind a crisp coolness in the air. The young girl had heard the whispers—soft, hushed conversations between society women in the lift, exchanged glances at the grocery store, and the unmistakable weight of unspoken sorrow in the way Arjun carried himself lately.

Sangeeta, too, seemed different. The usual fire in her voice had dimmed. When the young girl had casually asked if everything was okay at Poonam's house, Sangeeta had hesitated—a rare moment of uncertainty for someone so outspoken.

"Kuch toh hai. Sab kuch alag lag raha hai. Sahab chup hain... Arjun babu bhi ajeeb hain... aur Poonam madam bhi... Ek ajeeb si chhupi hai ghar mein," Sangeeta had said, shaking her head.

(There's something. Everything feels different. Everyone is quiet... even Arjun babu seems strange... and Poonam madam too... There's a strange silence in the house.)

"Par mujhe pata nahin kya hai."

(But I don't know what it is.)

The uneasiness in the young girl's chest deepened. She couldn't ignore it any longer.

That evening, she found herself standing outside Poonam's house, hesitating before knocking. The door was slightly ajar. She pushed it gently and stepped in.

Poonam was sitting in the living room, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, a cup of tea in her hands. She looked up and smiled—a tired, knowing smile that reached her eyes but didn't quite touch her soul.

"Aao beta, andar aao," Poonam said, gesturing to the seat beside her.

(Come in, child, come inside.)

The young girl hesitated for a moment, then sat down.

"Aap theek toh hain?" she asked gently.

(Are you alright?)

Poonam exhaled slowly, placing the cup on the table. For a moment, she said nothing. Just gazed at the girl as if weighing her words carefully. Then, with a small smile, she said,

"Kaisi ajeeb ladki ho tum... Jab tak khud pata na kar lo, tab tak chain se baithti nahin?"

(What a strange girl you are... You can't sit in peace until you find out for yourself, can you?)

The young girl smiled faintly.

"Mujhe laga... ki shayad mujhe aap se baat karni chahiye."

(I felt... maybe I should talk to you.)

Poonam nodded. A silence settled between them, stretching into something deep and unspoken. Then, almost in a whisper, she said,

"Mujhe cancer hai, beta."

(I have cancer, child.)

A sharp intake of breath. The words hung heavy in the air, as if refusing to settle.

The young girl's hands clenched into fists.

"Par... Arjun ko toh pata bhi nahi hai...?" her voice barely above a whisper.

(But... Arjun doesn't even know...?)

"*Hai*," Poonam said softly.

(He knows.)

"*Par usse yeh nahi pata ki mujhe sab kuch maloom hai.*"

(But he doesn't know that I already know everything.)

The young girl's eyes filled with unshed tears.

"*Aapko kaise pata chala?*"

(How did you find out?)

Poonam sighed, looking down at her hands.

"*Balkony mein khade ho kar ek maa apne bete ki aawaz bhi sun sakti hai aur uske dil ka dukh bhi... Mahesh aur Arjun ki baat maine sun li thi.*"

(Standing on the balcony, a mother can hear not just her son's voice but also the sorrow in his heart... I overheard Mahesh and Arjun talking.)

There was another silence. Heavier this time.

"*Aap ne unse kaha kyun nahi?*" the young girl finally asked.

(Why didn't you tell them?)

Poonam smiled, reaching out to hold her hand.

"Kya farq padta hai? Unki chhupne ki wajah sirf itni hai ki mujhe dukh na ho. Aur meri chhupne ki wajah sirf itni hai ki unka dukh kam ho."

(What difference does it make? They hide it only so I won't be hurt. And I hide it only so their pain is lessened.)

The young girl swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Arjun ko yeh baat batani hogi, Poonam aunty... Woh deserve karta hai ki usse sach pata ho."

(Arjun must be told, Poonam aunty... He deserves to know the truth.)

Poonam squeezed her hand gently.

"Aur tum bataogi?"

(And you will tell him?)

The young girl looked up, startled.

"Main?"

(Me?)

Poonam smiled softly.

"Haan. Tumse woh sun sakega. Tumhe woh samajh sakega."

(Yes. He'll be able to hear it from you. He'll be able to understand you.)

There was something in her voice—something that felt like a silent blessing.

"Tum usse sambhal logi na?"

(You'll take care of him, won't you?)

The young girl looked into Poonam's kind, tired eyes. And in that moment, she knew—this wasn't just about telling Arjun the truth. This was a silent promise, a responsibility given in love.

She nodded.

"Haan... main bataungi."

(Yes... I will tell him.)

Poonam's smile widened, and with a teasing glint in her eyes, she said,

"Aur ek aur baat... Is ghar ka aur Arjun ka khayal tum rakhogi na?"

(And one more thing... You'll take care of this house and of Arjun, won't you?)

The young girl felt her cheeks warm. She opened her mouth to protest, but Poonam simply chuckled.

"Beta, jab ek maa kisi ladki ke haath apne bete ko de deti hai, toh uske kehne ki zaroorat nahi padti... Bas ek baar dil dekhna padta hai."

(Child, when a mother places her son's hand in a girl's, there's no need for words... All it takes is seeing the heart once.)

A lump formed in the young girl's throat.

Poonam patted her hand gently, whispering,

"Tum dono ek doosre ke liye bane ho. Bas yeh baat tum dono ko samajhne mein thoda waqt lagega."

(You two are made for each other. It will just take a little time for both of you to realize it.)

The young girl looked away, biting her lip.

Outside, the rain had finally stopped.

But inside, something had shifted forever.



Chapter 34:

The Truth She Knew

The night air was thick with the scent of damp earth, the remnants of the evening rain still clinging to the leaves. Arjun stood on the balcony, his fingers wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee, staring blankly at the darkened skyline. His mind was a tangled mess of worry and helplessness, thoughts of his mother's illness circling in an endless loop.

He didn't hear the young girl step out until her voice, gentle yet firm, cut through the quiet.

"I know, Arjun."

He turned sharply, his brows furrowing. "Know what?"

She met his gaze, unwavering. "About Poonam Auntie."

The breath left his lungs. He looked away, gripping the cup tighter, as if grounding himself. "Who told you?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

She hesitated for a moment before stepping closer. "No one had to. I overheard people talking in the society. And then I saw the changes in her... in you. In everyone."

Arjun exhaled sharply, his jaw tightening. He hated that people gossip about something so deeply personal, but more than that, he hated that the weight of this truth was no longer his to bear alone.

The young girl placed a hesitant hand on his forearm. "And she knows too, Arjun," she said softly.

He stiffened. "Who?"

"Poonam Aunty."

His head snapped toward her, his eyes searching hers for any sign of uncertainty. But there was none. Only quiet understanding.

"That's not possible," he muttered. "We haven't told her."

"She heard you and Mahesh Uncle talking that night," she said, her voice laced with quiet sorrow. "She's known all along."

Arjun's grip on the cup loosened. He felt like the floor beneath him had just given way. His mother... had known? Had carried this alone, pretending for his sake?

His throat tightened. "Why didn't she say anything?"

The young girl swallowed. "Maybe she was waiting for you to say it first. Or maybe, she didn't want you to carry the guilt of breaking her heart."

A bitter laugh escaped him. "She was trying to protect me."

She nodded. "And you were trying to protect her."

Arjun rubbed his hand over his face, exhaustion crashing over him. The young girl took the cup from his hand and set it aside. Then, without thinking, she reached up and placed her hands gently on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her.

"You don't have to do this alone, Arjun," she whispered.

He stared at her, the warmth of her hands grounding him in a way he hadn't realized he needed.

And then she did something that shattered whatever restraint he had left.

She leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to his forehead.

It wasn't urgent. It wasn't rushed. It was steady, full of quiet strength.

Arjun closed his eyes for a brief second, his breath hitching. When he opened them, she was still there—her gaze unwavering, her presence solid.

He didn't say anything. He just reached up and held her face in his hands, mirroring her gesture. Their foreheads touched, and for a moment, they just breathed.

He wasn't alone.

And for the first time in weeks, that thought didn't terrify him.



Chapter 35: The Weight of Knowing

The heavy monsoon rains had eased into a soft drizzle, the rhythmic pitter-patter on the balcony railing, communicated within the silence between them. Poonam sat on the couch, her fingers wrapped around the warm ceramic cup Arjun had placed in her hands. It was the first time in a long while that he had made tea for her.

She smiled, taking a sip, but her eyes betrayed the storm within. The weight of the knowledge she carried—the inevitability of time slipping away—was pressing against her chest, yet she refused to let it show.

Across the room, Mahesh sat on the dining chair, his hands gripping the edge of the table, staring blankly ahead. The news had taken the wind out of him. The doctor's words still rang in his ears: *Stage three. We caught it late.*

It had been Arjun who had held his father's trembling hand after they had stepped out of the clinic. He hadn't said much, but in that moment, something between them had shifted. The invisible wall of years of distance and unspoken words had started to crack.

Poonam, as always, sensed the shift in their energies. She placed her cup down and turned toward them. "Do you both plan to sit like that all day? The house will turn into a graveyard before I even leave it," she said with a smirk, her voice carrying its usual lightness, but her eyes held something deeper.

Mahesh looked up, his face lined with exhaustion, while Arjun forced a small smile.

"I thought you'd scold me for the tea being too strong," Arjun said, attempting a weak jest.

She chuckled. "It is, but I appreciate the effort. You're learning, beta. One day, you'll make a fine husband."

Her eyes flickered toward the young girl, who had just entered the house, hesitant but determined. Arjun hadn't noticed her yet.

The girl took a breath and walked in. "Aunty, how's the tea? Don't tell me he put too much ginger again?"

Poonam smiled knowingly. "This one, at least, tries. Do you think you can handle him after I'm gone?"

The young girl froze, not expecting the directness of Poonam's words. Arjun turned sharply to look at his mother, his brows furrowed.

"Aunty..." the girl started, her voice softer now.

Poonam reached out, placing a hand over hers. "I know, beta. I know you know."

Silence hung in the air, thick with unspoken emotions.

Arjun looked between them, realization dawning. He turned to the young girl. "You... you knew?"

She hesitated but nodded. "Yes. And she knows that we all know."

Poonam let out a small laugh. "There's no point hiding from death, Arjun. It's like a nosy neighbor—it will find a way no matter what. The only question is, do we wait for it in fear or do we welcome it with a smile?"

Arjun clenched his fists, looking away. "Don't talk like that, Maa. We'll find a way."

Poonam sighed. "Some things are not in our hands, beta. But what *is* in our hands is how we choose to live in the days we have."

She turned to the young girl again, her eyes kind yet firm. "You have to take care of this house, okay? I've seen how you steady my son. He may act all grown up, but he's still

a little lost. And Mahesh... he will need someone to remind him to eat on time and to not pick fights with the vegetable vendor over coriander prices."

"Aunty..." The young girl's voice cracked slightly.

Poonam shook her head. "No crying. I don't have time for tears. I only have time for love."

The young girl bent forward and hugged her. It was brief, yet something within her shifted.

Arjun stood still, watching, feeling the weight of emotions pressing down on him. His mother had accepted her fate. And somewhere deep down, he knew he had to, too.

But he wasn't ready. Not yet.

The young girl turned to him. Her eyes, deep and understanding, searched his face. She reached out, hesitated for a second, and then gently held his hand.

"We're in this together, Arjun," she whispered.

And for the first time in days, he let himself breathe.



Chapter 36 : The Weight We Choose to Carry

Poonam's Home – Afternoon

Sangeeta clears the kitchen counter, wiping it with her usual efficiency. She looks up. Poonam is sitting by the window, her frail fingers tracing patterns on the condensation. The monsoon winds rattle the glass, filling the room with the scent of wet earth.

“You’re lost in thought, *Didi?*” Sangeeta asks, trying to sound casual.

Poonam turns, a knowing smile playing on her lips. “Just thinking about life. How it keeps moving, no matter what happens to us.”

Sangeeta scoffs. “Some people get to move forward. Some of us get stuck. Like a cycle—same fights, same struggles, same regrets.”

Poonam studies her for a moment. Then, softly, “And who decides whether you move or stay stuck?”

Sangeeta frowns. “Circumstances. Fate. The people around us.”

Poonam shakes her head. “No, Sangeeta. It’s us. We decide how much weight we want to carry.”

Sangeeta snorts, her old sarcasm surfacing. “Oh sure, *Didi*. Let me just drop all my problems like a sack of onions.”

Poonam chuckles, then leans forward. “You know what I’ve realized? Life is too short to carry anger. Or regret. We think we’re fighting battles with others, but most of the time, we’re just fighting ourselves.”

Sangeeta stiffens. “I’ve never been afraid of a fight.”

“I know.” Poonam’s voice is gentle. “You’ve faced life head-on. Never backed down. But tell me, Sangeeta, have you ever stopped to ask—what are you fighting for?”

Sangeeta opens her mouth but finds no answer. The question lingers, heavy in the air.

Poonam continues, “We think strength means never bending, never forgiving. But real strength? It’s knowing when to let go. When to stop carrying burdens that aren’t even ours.”

Sangeeta blinks rapidly, the weight of Poonam's words settling in.

Poonam reaches for her hand. "We all have our wounds, Sangeeta. But scars should remind us of survival, not suffering."

For the first time in a long time, Sangeeta has nothing to say. She looks away, blinking back tears.

Outside, the rain continues to fall, but somehow, the air feels lighter.

Sangeeta knew it won't "fix" her instantly, but it will plant the seed of change. From here, she will **start making peace with her past—not by forgetting, but by accepting.**



Chapter 37:

The Strength to choose

Sakshi knocked lightly on the door before stepping into Poonam's bedroom. The room was dimly lit, with a soft breeze coming through the open balcony door. Poonam was sitting on the bed, a *shawl* draped around her shoulders, staring at the sky as if lost in thought.

"You're awake?" Sakshi asked softly, placing a bag of fruits and a thermos on the side table.

Poonam turned to her with a tired but warm smile. "Did you think I'd sleep my days away just because I'm unwell?"

Sakshi smirked. "Well, you should. For once, let people fuss over you."

Poonam chuckled, patting the bed beside her. "Come, sit."

Sakshi sat down, studying her. Poonam looked weaker than before, but there was something in her eyes—something deep, almost serene. A woman who had seen life, accepted it, and was at peace with it.

After a moment, Poonam sighed. “I heard from Mahesh... you’re thinking of relocating?”

Sakshi hesitated. “I haven’t decided yet. I’m still... unsure.”

Poonam tilted her head, amused. “Unsure? That doesn’t sound like you. The Sakshi I know never hesitated to call out nonsense when she saw it.”

Sakshi exhaled. “This is different. This is about my life, my family, my marriage. What if I make the wrong choice?”

Poonam was silent for a while, then said, “The wrong choice isn’t choosing one path over another. The wrong choice is being too afraid to choose at all.”

Sakshi looked at her, startled.

Poonam continued, her voice calm but firm. “We all want certainty, Sakshi. We want guarantees that things will work out. But life doesn’t work that way. Sometimes, we take a step and the ground appears beneath our feet. And sometimes... we just fall.”

Sakshi swallowed. “But, what if I fall?”

Poonam gave her a knowing smile. “Then you get up.”

Sakshi chuckled, but her eyes stung. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It is,” Poonam said. “We complicate things with overthinking. We act like we have endless time to analyze, hesitate, and question. But we don’t.”

She looked directly into Sakshi’s eyes. **“If you have your family's love, you already have a safety net. Why are you scared to fly?”**

Sakshi felt something shift inside her. **Maybe it wasn’t about the choice itself. Maybe it was about trusting that she would be okay, no matter what.**

Poonam squeezed her hand. “Life is short, Sakshi. Don’t waste it carrying regrets. Choose. And then, make your choice right.”

Sakshi nodded, the weight on her chest feeling lighter.

As she left Poonam’s house that evening, she knew what she had to do.



Chapter 38:

The Goodbye That Wasn't an End

Sakshi entered her apartment with a quiet determination. The conversation with Poonam had settled deep inside of her, pushing away the intruding doubts.

Vikram was sitting on the couch, laptop open, but he looked up the moment she walked in. There was something in his expression—an awareness, as if he knew what was coming.

“You’re late,” he said, closing his laptop.

“I was with Poonam.”

He nodded. “How is she?”

Sakshi sighed. “Stronger than any of us.”

A pause stretched between them.

Sakshi sat across from him, her hands clasped together. "Vikram, I've made my decision."

He leaned forward slightly, attentive but calm. "Okay."

Sakshi took a deep breath. **"I want to take the relocation. I want to see where my career can go if I give it everything. And..."** she hesitated, then looked him straight in the eye, **"I don't want to do it with guilt."**

Vikram didn't react immediately. He studied her for a moment, then leaned back, exhaling slowly.

"You thought I'd stop you?"

Sakshi blinked. "Wouldn't you?"

Vikram shook his head. "Sakshi, when have I ever stopped you from doing what you want?"

She frowned. "That's the problem. You've never stopped me. Never asked me to stay. Never made me feel like my presence or absence makes a difference to you."

Vikram's jaw tightened, but he didn't look away. "And you think I don't care?"

"I don't know what to think, Vikram. I just know I don't want to live my life wondering 'what if' anymore."

He was silent for a moment. Then he got up, walked to the bookshelf, and picked up something—a small key.

He held it out to her.

She looked at him, confused. “What’s this?”

“Our apartment key,” he said. “For when you come back.”

Sakshi’s breath caught.

Vikram continued, his voice steady. “I won’t stop you. I won’t beg you to stay. But I want you to know that no matter where you go, this will always be your home. You can always come back.”

Sakshi swallowed hard, gripping the key. **It wasn’t a plea. It wasn’t an ultimatum. It was a quiet promise.**

Her eyes stung as she whispered, “You mean that?”

Vikram nodded. “Yes. Go chase your dream, Sakshi. Just know you’re not losing your home in the process.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks, but she smiled.

In that moment, she realized **love didn’t always come in grand gestures or dramatic pleas. Sometimes, it was just a quiet, unwavering assurance that no matter where you went, someone would be waiting for you.**

She stepped forward and hugged him—tight, lingering, full of unspoken words.

Vikram held her just as firmly.

And then, as if some invisible wall had finally crumbled, **he tilted her face up and kissed her.**

It wasn't hurried, nor desperate. It was slow, deep, filled with every emotion they had left unsaid for years.

A kiss that didn't beg her to stay, but promised her she would always belong.

When they finally broke apart, Vikram brushed a strand of hair from her face. "I'll be here, Sakshi."

She smiled through her tears, pressing the key into her palm. **She was leaving, but for the first time in years, she didn't feel like she was running away.**



Chapter 39: Sangeeta's Resolution

The evening air was thick with the scent of damp earth, the remnants of the afternoon rain still clinging to the trees. Sangeeta sat on the balcony of Poonam's house, her fingers tracing idle patterns on the metal railing. It was strange—this quietness inside her. All her life, she had fought, rebelled, carried her anger like armor. But now, she just felt... tired.

Poonam, ever perceptive, watched her with an amused smile.

“Kya hua, Sangeeta? Aaj tum mirchi kam lag rahi ho.”

(What happened, Sangeeta? Today you seem less fiery than usual.)

Sangeeta scoffed.

“Thak gayi hoon, bas.”

(I'm just tired, that's all.)

Poonam chuckled, shifting to sit comfortably.

“Zindagi se ya khud se?”

(From life, or from yourself?)

Sangeeta opened her mouth to retort but stopped. The question hung between them, heavier than she had expected. She looked at Poonam, really looked at her—the frailty hidden behind her usual sharp wit, the wisdom in her tired eyes. And suddenly, it didn't feel like a casual conversation anymore.

“I fought my whole life, Poonam,” she admitted, her voice uncharacteristically soft. “Fought for my respect, for my place, for my survival. And yet, *kahin na kahin, har jung ke baad bhi lagta tha ki haar gayi hoon.*”

(Somewhere deep down, after every battle, I still felt I had lost.)

Poonam nodded, as if she understood every battle Sangeeta had fought.

“Sangeeta, ek baat batao. Tumhe kabhi laga ki tumse jo bhi mila, woh bas ek saza thi?”

(Tell me something, Sangeeta. Did you ever feel that everything you got in life was nothing but punishment?)

Sangeeta frowned.

“Mila kya hai mujhe? Ek aisa pati jo na kabhi apna bana, na chhoda? Logon ka tanz? Har kadam pe koi na koi todne wala!”

(What have I ever received? A husband who was never truly mine, nor did he let me go? People’s taunts? Someone always ready to break me at every step?)

Poonam took a deep breath.

“Aur phir bhi tum aaj yahan ho. Jee rahi ho, lad rahi ho, hans rahi ho. Samajh rahi ho na? Zindagi tumse kabhi jeet nahi paayi.”

(And yet, here you are today. Living, fighting, laughing. Do you see? Life never managed to defeat you.)

Sangeeta stared at her, something shifting inside her.

Poonam continued, her voice gentle but firm.

“Tumhe kisise badla lene ki zaroorat nahi hai. Na duniya se, na khud se. Jo bhi tha, jo bhi hai, bas apna lo. Dukh uthana humare bas mein nahi, par dukh ko jeene ki wajah mat banao.”

(You don’t need revenge—neither from the world, nor from yourself. Whatever was, whatever is, just accept it. We cannot control suffering, but don’t make suffering the reason to live.)

There was silence. Sangeeta looked away, blinking back something that felt dangerously close to tears.

“Aur agar dukh hi pehchaan hai meri?”

(And what if sorrow is my only identity?)

Poonam smiled.

“Toh naye tareeke se jeena shuru karo.”

(Then begin to live in a new way.)

For the first time in a long while, Sangeeta let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Maybe, just maybe, it was time to stop fighting. Not because she was giving up, but because she was finally ready to live.

As she stood up to leave, Poonam called out, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Aur haan, thoda kam mirchi daalna khud ki zindagi mein. Swad badh jayega.”

(And yes, add a little less spice to your own life. The flavor will only get better.)

Sangeeta smirked.

“Dekhti hoon, shayad zindagi sach mein theek ho sake.”

(We'll see... maybe life really can get better.)

And with that, she walked away—not with the weight of regret, but with the lightness of acceptance.



Chapter 40: Monsoon Picnic – A Moment Between Rain and Reality

The air was thick with the scent of wet earth as the first drizzle of the monsoon kissed the ground. The sky was painted in shades of grey, a vast canvas of restless clouds rolling above them. The three women—Poonam, Sakshi, and the young girl—stood at the edge of a lush green meadow, where a light drizzle misted their faces.

They had driven out of the city for this—Poonam's idea.

“Baarish mein bheegna zaroori hai,” she had said, her eyes twinkling.

(It's important to get drenched in the rain.)

“Zindagi ki sabse gehri baatein baarish ke mausam mein hoti hain.”

(Some of life's deepest conversations happen in the rain.)

A small picnic basket sat open on a plaid sheet. A few thermos flasks, some sandwiches, and a half-eaten packet

of chips lay scattered. But none of them were paying attention to the food. They were simply breathing in the moment, letting the rain seep into their skin like a silent promise of something unsaid.

Poonam's Laughter – A Defiance Against Fate

Poonam threw her head back and laughed—loud, full, unrestrained. It was the kind of laughter that came not from joy, but from a quiet defiance against fate. The kind that masked pain, dared life to do its worst, and still refused to surrender.

The young girl watched her, trying to etch this image into her memory. This woman—so full of life, so radiant even in the face of something inevitable. She forced a smile, but her eyes stung with unshed tears.

She thought of Arjun.

Would he be able to laugh like this when he knew the truth?

Would he crumble, or would he learn to embrace life as his mother did?

Sakshi's Silent Conflict

Sakshi, sitting cross-legged on the blanket, absentmindedly traced patterns on the damp fabric. Her thoughts wandered to Vikram—the moment when she would leave, when she would walk away from the home they had built.

"Will he be okay?" she wondered.

"Will I?"

Her fingers clutched the edge of her saree, as if holding onto something slipping away.

Poonam, as if reading her mind, reached out and squeezed her hand.

"Ghar sirf deewaron se nahi banta, Sakshi. Usse sirf tum sambhal sakti ho, chahe kahin bhi raho."

(A home isn't built with walls, Sakshi. It stays with you, wherever you go.)

Sakshi blinked back tears and nodded. She had spent so long waiting for clarity, but maybe clarity wasn't something that arrived—it was something you chose.

Poonam's Reflection – The Irony of Life

As another gust of wind swirled around them, Poonam shivered slightly. She pulled her shawl closer and whispered, almost to herself:

“Jab tak identity nahi thi, tab tak jeevan tha...”

Jab identity, pyar aur respect mila... zindagi bewafa ho gayi?”

(When I had no identity, life was mine.

But now that I have love, respect, and identity... life betrays me?)

The young girl and Sakshi both turned to look at her.

A quiet moment passed between them, heavy yet strangely peaceful.

Somewhere in the distance, the rain fell harder. And in that backdrop, it was as if the monsoon itself spoke their unspoken thoughts.

“Baadal chhupne nahi dete dhoop ko...”

Par dhoop jaati kahan hai?

Woh wahin rehti hai, apne samay ke intezaar mein...”

(Clouds may hide the sun...

But does the sun ever go away?

It always waits—just for its time.)

“Pyaar milta hai, par waqt nahi...

Waqt milta hai, par pyaar door ho jaata hai...

Zindagi hamesha ek adhoori daastan si lagti hai...”

(We find love, but not time...

We find time, but love slips away...

Life always feels like an unfinished story.)

“Jo mila, woh apna nahi tha...

Jo apna tha, usse sambhal nahi paaye...

Aur jo sambhalne laayak tha,

Us tak haath kabhi pahunch nahi paaye...”

(What I got was never mine...

What was mine, I couldn't hold...

And what was worth holding on to,

I could never reach...)

The drizzle turned into a soft, steady rain, washing over them.

Poonam sighed and stretched her arms out, letting the raindrops fall onto her face.

“Baarish hamesha mujhe yeh yaad dilati hai ki sab kuch mitt jaata hai... sirf yaadein reh jaati hain.”

(Rain always reminds me that everything fades away... only memories remain.)

The young girl, lost in thought, whispered:

“Aur jo yaadon mein jeete hain, woh kabhi akela nahi hota.”

(And those who live in memories... they are never truly alone.)

Sakshi smiled through her tears.

“Toh chalo, ek aur yaad bana lein.”

(Then let's make one more memory.)

And with that, they stepped into the rain, letting go of everything—just for a moment, just for now.



Chapter 41:

The Last Goodbye

The airport was crowded, yet for Sakshi and Vikram, it felt like they were in a world of their own. The announcements, the rolling suitcases, the hurried footsteps—all faded into the background.

Vikram stood beside her, hands in his pockets, his usual composed demeanor giving away nothing. But Sakshi could sense it. The unsaid words. The slight tension in his jaw. The way his fingers curled into a fist and then relaxed, as if holding back something.

She took a deep breath. "So...this is it."

Vikram exhaled, nodding. "Yeah."

A pause.

"Are you sure?" His voice was even, but there was something beneath it—something only she could hear.

"Are you?" she countered.

He let out a quiet chuckle. "I think I always knew this would happen. I just didn't think it would be this soon."

She looked down at her boarding pass, then at him. "I never imagined I'd leave either. But if I don't go now, I might never get this chance again."

Vikram nodded slowly, his eyes scanning her face as if memorizing it.

"You'll be fine," she said, attempting a smile.

"Of course." He smirked. "I've survived all these years, haven't I?"

A comfortable silence settled between them, the kind that only people who had spent years together could share.

Then, Vikram's expression softened. "Sakshi, you know you can always come back, right? This house, this life...it's yours too."

She swallowed, forcing down the lump in her throat. "I know."

"Just don't...lose yourself there," he added. "Go, conquer the world, but don't forget where you belong."

A tear threatened to escape, but she blinked it away.

She took a step forward and, for the first time in a long time, hugged him. A real, lingering hug. Not out of

habit. Not for appearances. But because, despite everything, they had shared something deep—something that didn't need words.

Vikram hesitated for a fraction of a second before wrapping his arms around her.

"You'll be okay," she whispered.

"So will you," he replied.

The final boarding call echoed through the terminal.

Sakshi turned toward the entrance. The CISF security guard waited for her to show her ID and boarding pass, his expression professional but slightly impatient.

"Ma'am, please show your identity and boarding pass," he said.

Sakshi didn't move. She stood frozen, her heart pounding. Behind her, restless passengers shuffled, eager to move forward.

Then, almost involuntarily, **she turned around.**

Vikram was still standing there.

For the first time, **she saw the tears in his eyes.**

At that moment, she wanted to **drop everything.** To run back into his arms, to say she wasn't going, to hold onto what they had and never let go.

And before she could think—**she ran.**

Vikram caught her as she crashed into him, **his arms tightening around her, holding her close, letting her cry.**

Her breath was shaky, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

He cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. "Sakshi—**go and fly high.** I will be right here, waiting for you. This house, this life—it's still yours. Always will be."

She sobbed, nodding.

"Be strong," he whispered. "This is what you always wanted. **Don't let my Sakshi be so vulnerable and weak now.**"

Vikram took her boarding pass and ID, **walked with her up to the terminal entrance, and handed the documents to the security guard.**

One last **goodbye.**

Sakshi wiped her tears and forced a smile, raising her hand in a final wave before stepping inside.

Vikram watched her go, standing rooted to the spot.

Then, **he came back to his car. Sat on the driver's seat and tried to wear the seat belt and broke down. Crying out knowing that Sakshi will not be there with him for**

some time soon. And he felt so vulnerable, weak and lonely.

He thought... he was so alone now.

For an hour, he sat there in silence, staring at nothing.

And then, as Sakshi's flight took off, Vikram looked up.

He raised his hand toward the aircraft and blew a soft kiss.

Tears in his eyes. A small smile on his lips.

Because he knew.

She would be back.

And when she did... they would live together forever.



Chapter 42:

The First and Last Kiss

The terrace was soaked in the scent of fresh rain, the tiles still damp underfoot. The air brimming with moisture, carrying the distant hum of the city below. The storm had passed, leaving behind a sky painted in deep hues of orange and blue—*like a canvas caught between light and darkness, much like their contrast.*

Arjun stood at the edge, hands in his pockets, staring at the horizon where the sun was preparing to leave. He felt an odd kind of heaviness in his chest—the kind that came from **waiting too long for something you weren't sure you deserved.**

Then, behind him, came the soft sound of footsteps.

He didn't turn immediately. But, he knew who it was.

The young girl walked toward him, her eyes searching his face. She stopped just a few steps away, wrapping her

arms around herself—not from cold, but from the sheer weight of the moment.

"You never liked sunsets, did you?" she asked, her voice light, teasing.

Arjun let out a soft sigh, still looking ahead. "Maybe I never looked at them properly before."

She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. **Something between them had shifted—there was no more running, no more pretending.**

"Then look at this one properly, Arjun. Because I don't know if we'll have another."

That made him turn.

She was standing there, **drenched in the golden evening light, her hair still slightly damp from the rain.** Something inside him clenched.

"I never asked you to stay," she said softly.

Arjun's throat tightened. "You never had to."

A silence stretched between them. Not an awkward one—a **silence heavy with unspoken words, unfinished confessions, and feelings too big for language.**

Then, before he could think, he reached out—**gently tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.**

She closed her eyes at his touch. Just for a second. Just long enough for him to realize that **he had lost this battle long ago.**

"You're going to disappear again, aren't you?" he murmured.

She shook her head. "Not if you stop me."

And just like that, **the dam broke.**

He pulled her close, his fingers tracing the curve of her jaw before tilting her face up to his. **Their lips met—not softly, not hesitantly—but like two people who had been starving for years.**

The world around them disappeared.

The kiss was everything at once—a **confession, a surrender, a plea.** His hands held her as if he was afraid she'd slip away again. Her fingers curled into his shirt, **pulling him closer, refusing to let go.**

A distant rumble of thunder rolled across the sky, but they were too engulfed by their tale .

She tasted like the rain and unsaid words. He tasted like longing and unfinished dreams.

When they finally broke apart, breathless, foreheads touching, **she let out a shaky laugh, wiping a tear that had slipped free.**

"You're such an idiot," she whispered.

"For what?" Arjun asked, his lips brushing against her skin.

"For waiting this long."

He smiled—soft, but sure. "I won't wait anymore."

She searched his face, as if memorizing every inch of it.

"Then don't let go."

The sky had darkened now, the last traces of sunlight slipping away. And as the first few drops of **a light drizzle** fell again, they stood there, holding each other, letting the rain wash away everything that no longer mattered.

For the first time, **neither of them was running.**



Chapter 43: Reflection

A bright morning after the monsoon, the sky washed clean, golden sunlight streaming through, symbolizing new beginnings.)

The Security Guard at the gate wondering:

“Zindagi ajeeb hai... Hum hamesha sochte hain ki kal sab theek ho jayega, lekin 'kal' kabhi aata hi nahi...”

(Life is strange... We always think tomorrow everything will be fine, but that ‘tomorrow’ never really comes...)

“Hum planning karte hain, sapne dekhte hain... lekin yeh yaad nahi rakhte ki jo waqt abhi haathon mein hai, bas wahi asli hai.”

(We make plans, we dream... but we forget that the only real time is the one we hold in our hands right now.)

“Rishtey sirf sath rehne se nahi bante... jo dil ke kareeb hai, woh kabhi door jaa hi nahi sakta.”

(Relationships aren't built just by staying together... whoever lives in the heart can never truly go far away.)

“Hum hamesha sochte hain ki hum jo chahein, wahi mile... par jo milta hai, shayad wahi humare liye sahi hota hai.”

(We always wish to get what we desire... but perhaps what we do receive is exactly what was meant for us.)

“Aur jab hum kisi apne ko kho dete hain, toh samajh aata hai ki zindagi na kabhi hamari thi, na kabhi hamari hogi... bas ek safar hai, jisme milne aur bichadne ka silsila chalta rehta hai.”

(And when we lose someone dear, we realize life was never ours, and never will be... it is just a journey, where meetings and partings continue endlessly.)

“Jo log chale jaate hain, woh kahaan jaate hain? Shayad woh yaadon mein, palon mein, un baaton mein hamesha zinda rehte hain jo humne unse seekha.”

(Where do those who leave really go? Perhaps they live forever in memories, in moments, in the lessons they leave behind.)

“Zindagi wahi jeet gaya jo jeete jee jeena seekh gaya... jo har din ko apna akhri din maan kar, khul kar jeeya.”

(The one who truly wins at life is the one who learns to live while alive... who embraces each day as their last, and lives it fully.)

The security guard, the same man who had silently watched the story unfold, closes the gates of the house, looking up at the sky.

The sun shines brighter.

Life moves on.

Not in forgetting, but in carrying forward everything that ever mattered.



Chapter 44:

The Morning After the Storm

The rain had washed everything away. The world smelled fresh—of Petrichor of new beginnings. The sun was kinder today, peeking through scattered clouds, spreading golden warmth over the city.

Inside the house, life had not stopped, but it had changed.

Mahesh sat on the veranda, staring at the empty chair beside him. For years, it had been Poonam's place. He still made two cups of tea every morning—one for him, and one for her. He knew she wouldn't take a sip, but some habits were not meant to be broken.

Arjun stood by the window, watching the city wake up. He felt a warm presence behind him. The young girl. She didn't speak—she simply stood beside him. It was enough.

Sakshi sat inside her room, flipping through a book Vikram had once gifted her. She had left once, thinking she had to chase a dream. But today, she realized—dreams were never destinations, only different roads leading home.

Sangeeta, who had spent her life fighting, found herself pausing today. She watched her husband work, seeing him differently. Maybe, she had been too harsh. Maybe, he had been too indifferent. But now, there was time. They could try again.

At the center of it all, Poonam's presence lingered—not as grief, but as warmth. She had left behind more than memories. She had left behind wisdom, laughter, and an unspoken promise that life, no matter how unfair, was always worth living.

Outside, at the gates of the house, the security guard stood silently. He had watched the people inside laugh, cry, love, and lose. Now, he saw them move forward.

And as the morning sunlight touched the house, he smiled.

Some goodbyes did not end. They were simply new beginnings in disguise.

Mahesh and the Empty Chair

Mahesh sat on the Balcony staring at the empty chair beside him. For years, it had been Poonam's place.

He still made two cups of tea every morning—one for him, and one for her. He placed the cup on the table, watching the steam rise, imagining her gentle smile. He knew she wouldn't take a sip, but some habits were not meant to be broken.

"Jo log chale jaate hain, woh kahaan jaate hain? Shayad woh yaadon mein, palon mein, un baaton mein hamesha zinda rehte hain jo humne unse seekha."

(Where do those who die really go? Perhaps they live on forever in our memories, in fleeting moments, in the lessons they left behind.)

Arjun and the Young Girl – A Love That Endured

Arjun stood by the window, his hands resting on the wooden frame. The city was waking up, oblivious to the storms people carried within.

A presence warmed his side. The young girl stood beside him, watching him in silence.

No words were needed.

She reached for his hand, her fingers closing around his. He turned to her, and saw the quiet strength in her eyes. She had always been his refuge, his peace in chaos.

"Hum hamesha sochte hain ki hum jo chahein, wahi mile... par jo milta hai, shayad wahi humare liye sahi hota hai."

(We always believe that we should get exactly what we want... but perhaps, what we receive is truly what's right for us.)

Sakshi and Vikram – A Love That Waits

Sakshi sat in the room, running her fingers over the cover of an old book. A gift from Vikram. She smiled faintly, flipping through the pages.

She had left, believing she had to chase a dream. But, dreams were never destinations, only different roads leading home.

Vikram's words echoed in her mind—"Go and fly high. I will be right here waiting for you."

A lump formed in her throat, but she swallowed it down. He had given her wings, but he had also given her an anchor.

"Rishtey sirf saath rehne se nahi bante... jo dil ke kareeb hai, woh kabhi door jaa hi nahi sakta."

(Relationships aren't built merely by staying together... the ones truly close to the heart can never really go away.)

Sangeeta – A New Beginning

Sangeeta, who had spent her life fighting, found herself pausing today. She stood near the door, watching Mahesh from afar.

She had spent years resenting him. He had spent years withdrawing from her. But now, there was time. Maybe they could try again—not as the same people, but as two people willing to understand each other.

"Zindagi wahi jeet gaya jo jeete jee jeena seekh gaya... jo har din ko apna akhri din maan kar, khul kar jeeya."

(The one who truly wins at life is the one who learns to live while still alive... who embraces each day as if it were their last, and lives it fully.)



Chapter 45: The Security Guard – An Unseen Observer

Outside, at the gates of the house, the security guard stood silently with racing thoughts. He had been an unseen companion of the people inside through their laughter, worries, love, and loss. Now, he saw them move forward.

He closed the gate gently and looked up at the sky. The sun was shining brighter, as if the universe itself had cosmically decided that today was a new day.

And as the wind whispered through the trees, carrying memories, love, and silent goodbyes, he smiled.

Because life never stops. It simply moves forward, carrying everything that ever mattered.

"Zindagi toh rukti nahi,

Chaahe hum kisi mod par tham bhi jaayein...

Waqt behta rehta hai,

Chaahe yaadon ka dariya kinare lagayein..."

"Mohabbat bhi ek safar hai,

Koi milta hai, koi chhuta hai...

Par jo dil se chala tha saath,

Woh kabhi alag kahan hota hai?"

"Jeene ke liye bas do baatein zaroori hain,

Ek—jo aaj hai usse jee lo,

Doosra—jo apna hai, usse kho mat do..."

"Roshni sirf suraj ki nahi hoti,

Kayi baar, dil ka diya bhi kaafi hota hai...

Zindagi har baar naye mod laaye,

Par umeed ka ek raasta toh hamesha hota hai..."

The Road Lit by Hope

Life does not stop, even when we pause,
even when we think we have reached an ending,
time continues— a steady current
flowing beyond our reach.

We try to hold it, to anchor it with memory,
but memory itself drifts, changing shape like water.

Love, too, is a journey. Some walk beside us for a while,
some vanish into the distance.

Yet those who truly live in the heart
are never lost— they remain,
woven into our days in silence.

Living, perhaps, is not so complicated.
It is the courage to inhabit the present,
to keep close what is ours,
to let go of what was never meant to stay.
Light is not only found in the sun.
Sometimes it is a small flame
hidden deep within—
flickering, fragile,
yet enough to show the way forward.
Every turn life gives us
brings uncertainty,
but somewhere,
a road waits quietly,
lit by the quiet persistence of hope.

The golden light spread across the sky, filling the world
with warmth. Somewhere in the silence, there was a
quiet promise—of love that never fades, of hope that
never dies, of life that always finds a way.



Epilogue

The security guard watches as life moves on. The sun rises again, people return to their routines, and the world does not stop for anyone's sorrow. Yet, something lingers—an invisible thread of love, choices, and moments that changed lives forever.

Somewhere, Arjun and the young girl sit together, watching the sky change colors, their fingers entwined in a silent promise.

Sakshi looks out of her new office window, knowing that home is not just a place, but a feeling she will always return to.

Sangeeta, for the first time in years, smiles without a trace of sadness—because she has finally let go.

And in a quiet frame on the wall, Poonam's eyes shine with warmth, as if whispering:

"Zindagi koi ginti nahi, ek ehsaas hai... jo jitni mehsoos karega, utni hi rahegi."

(Life is not a number, but a feeling... it lasts only as much as you allow yourself to feel it.)



Author's Note

Thanks to the "me time" during COVID, I finally had the space to bring these characters to life. But in all veracity, they have been with me for much longer—born from my observations of life, the books I've read, and the films that left a lasting impression.

This story is not unique in its essence—its emotions, conflicts, and relationships are reflections of real life, experiences we all share in some form. Readers may find echoes of these characters and moments in their own memories; in stories they've encountered before. But, what makes this novel special is my perspective—the way I see these characters, the way I interpret life through them.

If this book resonates with you, if it makes you pause, reflect, or feel deeply, then I believe I have done justice to the story I wanted to tell.

Thank you for being a part of this journey.



Authors Profile

Manoj Gupta is a seasoned HR professional with over 30 years of leadership experience across Indian and multinational companies. Born into a middle-class family, his journey has been shaped by resilience, hard work, and an enduring curiosity about people and their stories.

Extensive travel across the globe has broadened his horizons and deepened his outlook on societies, beliefs, cultures, and human relationships. Currently based in Mumbai with his family, Manoj continues to draw from these diverse experiences in life and work.

Recognized as *Best HR Leader* in March 2022, Manoj has dedicated his career to understanding human behavior, relationships, and psychology—insights that naturally infuse his writing. His storytelling emerges from real patterns of life, allowing readers to see their own untold experiences reflected on the page.

An avid bilingual reader in Hindi and English, he also nurtures a love for ghazals, poetry, and classical music. Manoj does not wish to limit himself to a single genre; he aspires to explore varied forms of writing—relatable stories of human relationships, corporate life, mythology, and fiction. Through his words, he captures the richness of human emotions and the subtle nuances of everyday life, creating narratives that are both authentic and deeply relatable.